ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
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ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

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Husky & His
White Cat
Shizun
Erha He Ta De Bai Mao Shizun
1

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Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HUSKY & HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN:
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN VOL. 1

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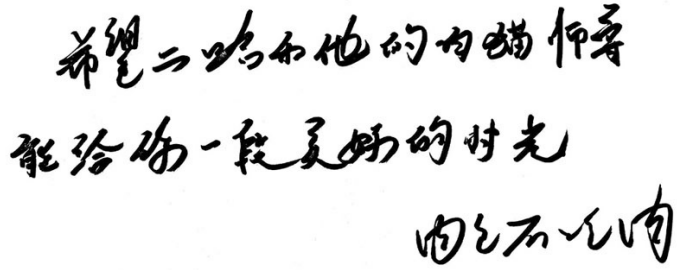

I hope *The Husky & His White Cat Shizun* brings you a wonderful time.

—ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
("MEATBUN DOESN'T EAT MEAT")

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Chapter 1:
This Venerable One Dies

BEFORE MO RAN became an emperor, people were always calling him a dog. The villagers called him a *damn mutt*, his cousin called him a *stupid cur*, and the woman who took him in outdid them all, calling him a *bitch's whelp*.

Mind you, there were other dog-related metaphors that weren't so bad. For example, his one-night stands always grumbled with feigned petulance that his energy in bed was like that of an alpha dog. Though his words were sweet enough to tempt the soul, the weapon between his legs had lethality enough to make them feel like they were about to lose their lives. But after the act, they would turn around and boast about that same thing, to the point that the entire pleasure district knew this Mo Weiyu fellow was both a handsome face and a good lay. All who had tried him out found themselves quite fulfilled, and those who hadn't yet were sorely tempted.

It must be said that all those names were incredibly spot-on. Mo Ran was indeed very much like a dumb tail-wagging dog.

Only once he became emperor of the cultivation world did these epithets disappear in a flash.

One day, a small sect from a faraway land offered Mo Ran the gift of a puppy.

The puppy had a greyish-white coat and a flame-shaped mark upon its forehead, somewhat like that of a wolf. But it was only as large as a melon, and it looked like it had the sentience of one, all chubby and round as it was. It nonetheless seemed to think itself a rather mighty creature and ran all around the great hall with abandon. Several times, it tried to catch a glimpse of the calm and unruffled presence on the throne, making attempts to scale the high steps—but its legs were too short, and after multiple defeats, it finally abandoned its efforts.

Mo Ran stared at that energetic yet seemingly brainless ball of fur for a long while before suddenly letting out a laugh, calling it a damn mutt as he

did so.

The puppy soon grew to become a big dog, the big dog became an old dog, and eventually, the old dog became a dead dog.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, then opened them. His life, filled as it had been with the ebb and flow of prestige and shame, ups and downs, felt like it had gone by in a blink. Before he knew it, thirty-two years had passed.

He'd grown bored of his dalliances, and everything had lost its flavor and appeal. In recent years, the familiar faces around him had faded away, one by one, and even that flame-marked dog had passed on to the heavens. He felt that soon it would be time for him as well.

Time for it all to come to an end.

He plucked a plump, smooth-skinned grape from his bowl of fruit and began to peel off its purple skin with unhurried movements. His actions were easy and practiced, like that of a tribal chief in his camp, peeling off the robes of his exotic concubine, languid and lazy. The lustrous flesh of the grape quivered lightly in his fingertips, the juice seeping out an exquisite purple, vibrant like sunset-limned clouds carried in the beaks of wildfowl across the sky, like haitang blossoms entering slumber in late spring.

Or of a bloodstain.

He scrutinized his fingers as he chewed and swallowed the heavy sweetness of the grape before lifting his gaze with detached indolence.

It's about time now, he thought to himself.

About time for him to go to hell.

Mo Ran, courtesy name Weiyu. The first emperor of the cultivation world.

It had not been an easy path to reach where he now stood. It had taken not only outstanding spiritual power but a thick-skinned shamelessness and disregard for what others thought.

Before he'd come along, the ten great sects of the cultivation world had been locked in a stalemate, fighting nonstop over their divided territory. With the sects clashing against one another like so, none had been able to emerge as a frontrunner to rule the world and call the shots. Besides, the sect leaders were all learned people; even if they had wanted to grant themselves titles,

they were too wary of chroniclers' pens, too self-conscious of how they would be portrayed in the annals of history.

Mo Ran was different. He was a scoundrel.

What others never dared to do, he'd gone and done it all. Drinking the finest, fieriest wines of the mortal realm, marrying the most beautiful woman in the world, first establishing himself as "Taxian-jun," leader of the cultivation world, then declaring himself emperor.

All bowed before him. Any who refused to kneel were slaughtered one and all. In his years of tyranny, the cultivation world was drowned in blood, and desolation and starvation spread throughout the land. Countless vigilantes died martyrs' deaths, and Rufeng Sect of the ten great sects was completely annihilated.

Later still, even Mo Ran's esteemed teacher was unable to escape his demonic claws. In a final battle with Mo Ran, his once-beloved disciple defeated him, then imprisoned him in his palace. No one knew what had become of the man thereafter.

A land of clear rivers and calm seas, once great, now lay smothered under the miasmic haze of pandemonium.

That dog of an emperor Mo Ran was not well-read, and what's more, he cared little for taboos or inhibitions. As such, during the time in which he was in power, there was no shortage of absurdity. For example, the titles of his reigning years.

The first three years of his reign he named "Wang Ba: Tortoise."[1] He had thought of it while feeding fish by the pond.

The second set of three years he titled "Gua: Croak," the reason being that he'd heard frogs croaking in the garden during the summer months and believed them to be inspiration sent from the heavens—something not to be taken for granted.

The country's scholars believed that no reigning titles could ever be more tragic than "Tortoise" and "Croak," but alas, they underestimated Mo Weiyu.

In the third set of three years, a restlessness stirred throughout the realm; whether they were Buddhists, Daoists, or spiritual cultivators, the

righteous people of the jianghu could no longer endure Mo Ran's tyranny, and they began to rise up in rebellion.

And so, after much consideration and contemplation, after tossing aside draft after draft, Mo Ran eventually came up with a title that shook the heavens and earth, that made gods and ghosts weep alike: "Ji Ba: Cease Battle."[2]

The title's metaphorical meaning was all well and good. This emperor, the first of his kind, had used every single last drop of brainpower he possessed to come up with it, and he had based it off of the fortuitous phrase, "Lay down your arms and cease battle."

It was only that the phrase was exceedingly awkward when spoken out loud in the common context. It was all the more awkward for those who couldn't read and could therefore only go off the way it sounded.

The first year was called Ji Ba Yuan Nian, the First Year of Cease Battle[3]—but why did it have to sound like the Year of Cock and Balls?

The second year was called the Second Year of Cock.

Then the Third Year of Cock.

There were those who, behind locked doors, cursed and said, "This is ridiculous. You might as well just go ahead and call it the 'Age of the Cock'! That way, when you want to ask a man's age, all you'll have to do is ask the vintage of his cock! A hundred-year-old man could just be called Centennial Cock!"

After three agonizing years, the time finally came for the reigning title "Ji Ba: Cease Battle" to be replaced. The world waited anxiously to see what His Imperial Majesty the emperor would come up with for the fourth round.

However, by this time, Mo Ran had lost all interest in such matters, because it was in this year that the unrest simmering throughout the lands finally came to a boil. After nearly a decade of weathering Mo Ran's tyranny, those righteous people, heroes and vigilantes one and all, finally gathered to form an army, millions strong, and banded together against the emperor, Mo Weiyu.

The cultivation world needed no emperor, let alone a tyrant like him.

After many months of bloody battles, the rebel army finally came to

the foot of Sisheng Peak. Located within the region of Sichuan, this was a place of steep, perilous mountain bluffs, surrounded throughout the year by curling streams of clouds and mist. At the very summit of it all stood Mo Ran's grand and majestic palace.

It was too late to turn back now, and their goal of overthrowing the tyrant was but a single strike away. However, this last stretch was also the most treacherous; though the shining beacon of victory lay before their eyes, the previously unassailable unity of the army, joined together in common opposition to Mo Ran, began to fracture. They were all aware that once the old regime was overthrown, a new order would need to be established. Nobody wanted to spend all of their energy in this last stretch; thus, nobody volunteered to spearhead the final charge to lead them up the mountain.

They were all afraid that this cunningly vicious tyrant would suddenly drop from the skies, bare his glinting, bestial teeth, and rip apart all those who dared to surround and destroy his palace, shredding them to pieces.

"Mo Weiyu's spiritual powers are unfathomable, and the man himself is treacherous," one person said, face grim. "We must be cautious, lest we fall for his traps."

All the leaders chimed in with their agreement.

At that moment, an exceptionally handsome young man with proud, haughty features stepped forward. He wore a set of light armor in blue with silver trim and a belt embellished with a lion's head, and his hair was fastened in a high ponytail, secured at the base with an exquisite silver hairpin.

"We've already come to the foot of the mountain," the young man said with an ugly expression. "What are you all milling about for, so reluctant to go up? Are you waiting for Mo Weiyu to come down himself? What a bunch of cowardly good-for-nothings!"

His words ignited a flurry of responses from the gathered.

"What are you talking about, Xue-gongzi? What do you mean by cowardly? A soldier must always be prudent and cautious. If we were to be as brash and reckless as you, who would take responsibility if something untoward were to happen?"

"Heh, Xue-gongzi is the darling of the heavens, and we are but mere

commoners," another person sneered tauntingly. "If the darling of the heavens can't wait to fight the Emperor of the Mortal Realm, then by all means, please be the first to go up the mountain. We'll set up a feast down here by the foot to await your gracious return with Mo Weiyu's head. Wouldn't that be nice?"

That comment had gone too far. One of the old Buddhist monks in the alliance swept in to hold back Xue Meng, who was on the verge of losing it, and plastered on a benign expression. "Xue-gongzi, pay heed to these words," he said in a sympathetic, coaxing tone. "This old monk knows that you and Mo Weiyu share a deep, personal grudge, but this assault on the palace is a critical operation. You must think of the group; don't let your emotions carry you away."

The individual whom everyone referred to as "Xue-gongzi" was a youth named Xue Meng. Over a decade ago, he'd been praised by all as a young prodigy, the "darling of the heavens."

But circumstances changed with the times, and Xue Meng was no longer in his element; now he was forced to suffer their taunts and ridicule, and all so he could go up the mountain to meet Mo Ran face-to-face once more.

Xue Meng's face twisted with anger, his lips trembling, but with great effort, he suppressed his feelings and merely asked, "Then just how long do you plan to wait around?"

"We've got to at least survey the surroundings, right?"

"That's right. What if Mo Weiyu has set traps?"

"Xue-gongzi, don't be impatient," the old monk who'd stepped in earlier added. "We've come all this way to the foot of the mountain, so it would be best to remain wary. Either way, Mo Weiyu is trapped inside his palace and can't come down to us. He's at the end of his rope with nowhere to go. What use would it be for us to be impatient and act recklessly? There are so many of us down here, and so many illustrious and prominent figures in our company; if they were to lose their lives to rash judgment, who would be responsible?"

"Responsible?" Xue Meng burst with rage. "Then let me ask you: Who's going to be responsible for my shizun's life? Mo Ran has had my

shizun imprisoned for ten years! Ten whole years! With my shizun right before my eyes, just up the mountain, how am I supposed to wait?"

On hearing Xue Meng mention his teacher, the mob couldn't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Some looked ashamed and others averted their gazes, mumbling one excuse or another.

"Ten years ago, when Mo Ran gave himself the title Taxian-jun, he laid waste to the seventy-two cities of Rufeng Sect—and planned to do the same to the remaining nine great sects. Later still, when he crowned himself emperor, he was going to kill every last one of you. Who was it who stopped him both times? If it hadn't been for my shizun, who put his own life on the line for you, would any of you be alive now? Would you even be standing here, spouting these empty words at me?"

At length, someone cleared their throat. "Xue-gongzi, don't be angry," they said gently. "With regards to Chu-zongshi, we…all feel guilt as well as gratitude. But as you said, he's been imprisoned for ten years. If anything was going to happen, it would've already… Well, you've waited for ten years now; waiting another moment won't hurt, wouldn't you say?"

"Wouldn't I say? I'd say go fuck yourself!"

That someone gaped in shock. "How dare you!"

"Why wouldn't I dare? Shizun put his own *life* on the line, and it was all to save people like…people like…" Xue Meng couldn't continue the sentence. Instead, he choked out through a sob, "All of you are undeserving."

His piece said, Xue Meng jerked away, turning his face aside. His shoulders shook lightly as he held back his tears.

"It's not like we said we weren't going to rescue Chu-zongshi…"

"Yeah, we all remember the things Chu-zongshi did for us. Of course we didn't forget. It's pure slander for Xue-gongzi to say such things. Calling us ingrates—I won't stand for it."

"But come to think of it, wasn't Mo Ran also a disciple of Chu-zongshi?" someone asked quietly. "I must say, when the disciple turns out to be a malefactor, it's only right for the teacher to take responsibility. As they say, 'To raise without teaching is the father's flaw, and to teach without discipline is the teacher's failing.' Maybe it was inevitable. So what's there to

complain about?"

Now *this* was definitely going too far, and it was immediately decried.

"What nonsense! Watch what you're saying!" The same decrier then turned toward Xue Meng with a diplomatic look. "Xue-gongzi, some patience…"

"How can I be patient?" Xue Meng cut him off, his gaze furious. "Easy enough for all of you to stand around talking, but that's my shizun! *Mine!* I haven't seen him in *years*! I don't even know whether he's alive or dead, much less how he's doing! Why do you think I'm even standing here?"

His breathing was harsh and ragged, and the corners of his eyes reddened as he continued. "Don't tell me you're all waiting here hoping for Mo Weiyu to come down the mountain of his own accord, to kneel in front of you and beg for mercy."

"Xue-gongzi…"

"Other than Shizun, I have no family left in this world." Xue Meng jerked his sleeve free from the old monk's hold. "Fine, you won't go?" he asked hoarsely. "Then I'll go myself."

After flinging out that last statement, he left to head up the mountain, a solitary figure with a single sword.

The chilly, damp wind mingled with the susurration of the foliage; combined with the thick fog that lay everywhere, it was as if countless malicious ghosts and aggrieved spirits wandered amidst the trees, rustling and whispering.

All alone, Xue Meng climbed the peak toward Mo Ran's magnificent palace, which stood like a beacon in the night, illuminated by calm candlelight. As he drew near, his gaze caught on three graves at the foot of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. When he approached for a closer look, he saw that long weeds had grown over the first grave mound, and on its gravestone were inscribed the following words in a childish, dogged scrawl: "Grave of the Esteemed Consort Chu."

In contrast to this "Steamed Consort," the second grave was newly dug, the earth only just sealed, and upon the tombstone was inscribed: "Grave of the Deep-Fried Empress Song."

Xue Meng had no words. If this had been ten or more years ago, such a ridiculous sight would've made him laugh out loud in spite of himself. At the time, he and Mo Ran had been disciples under the same shizun, and Mo Ran had been quite the joker. Even though Xue Meng had found Mo Ran disagreeable, despite everything, the man had still ended up making him laugh from time to time.

Heaven only knew what all this Steamed Consort and Deep-Fried Empress business was about. Perhaps the style with which Scholar Mo had graced his two wives was the same as that which had produced "Wang Ba: Tortoise," "Gua: Croak," and "Ji Ba: Cease Battle." As to why he would bestow such monikers on his own empress and consort, there was no knowing.

Xue Meng turned his gaze to the third grave, which lay open under the night sky. Within it lay a coffin, but there was no body in that coffin, and the tombstone remained unmarked.

However, before the grave sat a small pot of pear-blossom white wine, a bowl of chili-oil wontons long gone cold, and a few plates of spicy, numbing mala side dishes—all fare favored by Mo Ran.

Xue Meng stared at the grave for a long moment as a shock struck his heart. Could it be that Mo Ran had no intention of fighting, and that he had long since dug his own grave? That he was ready to die?

The thought made Xue Meng break into a cold sweat. He refused to believe it. Mo Ran was the kind of person who clung to things till his dying breath without ever showing fatigue, the kind of person who didn't know the definition of surrender. Given his history, he was bound to keep fighting the rebel army to the bitter end, so why…

These past ten years, Mo Ran had stood at the summit of power. What exactly had he seen? What exactly had happened to him? No one knew.

Xue Meng turned around and re-entered the darkness, stalking in great strides toward the brightly lit Wushan Palace.

Mo Ran sat within that palace, his eyes screwed shut and his face deathly pale. Xue Meng had guessed right. Mo Ran was determined to die. That grave mound outside had been dug by his own hands. Two hours ago, he'd used a communication spell to dismiss his servants, then swallowed a

deadly poison. With his high level of cultivation, the poison's efficacy had slowed to a crawl as it spread throughout his body, leaving him able to feel every single agonizing moment with vivid acuity as the effects of the poison dissolved his internal organs.

The doors to the hall opened with a creak.

Mo Ran didn't look up. He only rasped, "Xue Meng. It's you, right? Have you come?"

Xue Meng stood alone upon the golden pavement of the hall, his ponytail swinging free, his light armor glinting.

This was a reunion of disciples who had been in the same sect, once upon a time. Yet Mo Ran's face was devoid of expression as he sat there with his chin propped in one hand, the thick curtains of his fine lashes lowered over his gaze.

Everyone spoke of him as though he were a savage fiend with three heads and six arms, but in truth, he was exceptionally good-looking. The bridge of his nose curved delicately, and the color of his lips was pale and dewy; his natural features had a sweet, gentle cast. If one only looked at his face, they would think he was a good and lovely person.

The sight of this face was all Xue Meng needed to confirm his suspicion—Mo Ran had poisoned himself. It was hard to parse his feelings at that moment, and when he opened his mouth to speak, no words came out. In the end, he clenched his fists and asked, "Where's Shizun?"

"What?"

"I said: Where's Shizun?!" Xue Meng demanded sharply a second time. "Yours, mine, *our* shizun—where is he?!"

"Oh." Mo Ran snorted softly and finally, slowly, blinked open his eyes. His pupils were dark, so black they looked to have hints of purple, and his gaze seemed to travel through layer upon layer of time since past before focusing on Xue Meng. "Come to think of it, it's been two years since the last time you and Shizun met face-to-face—since your farewell at Kunlun Taxue Palace." Mo Ran smiled faintly. "Xue Meng, do you miss him?"

"Enough nonsense! Give him back to me!"

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Mo Ran watched Xue Meng calmly as he bore through the twisting pain in his stomach. His lips curled into a sneer, and he leaned against the back of his throne. Darkness encroached on his sight; it was as if he could feel his innards wrenching, melting, and disintegrating into stinking, bloody swill.

"Give him back to you?" Mo Ran replied indolently. "How foolish. Why don't you use your brain to think a little? Shizun and I share such an intense hatred for each other. How could I allow him to live in this world?"

"You!" Xue Meng's face went white, and his eyes widened as he stepped back involuntarily. "You can't have… You wouldn't…"

"I wouldn't what?" Mo Ran laughed softly. "Why don't you tell me: Why wouldn't I?"

Xue Meng's voice shook. "But he's your… He's still your shizun, after everything… How could you bear to kill him?!"

He raised his head to look up at Mo Ran, seated on his emperor's throne. The heavens had Fuxi, hell had Yanluo, and in the mortal realm, there was Mo Weiyu.

But as far as Xue Meng was concerned, even if Mo Ran had become the eminent Emperor of the Mortal Realm, there was no way he could have done this. His body shook all over as his outraged tears spilled over. "Mo Weiyu, are you even human anymore? He once…"

Mo Ran lifted his gaze. "He once what?"

"You know very well how he once treated you," Xue Meng said, tone taut with emotion.

Mo Ran barked a sudden laugh. "Are you trying to remind me that he once beat me so hard that I was left covered with cuts and bruises? That he made me kneel before all to confess my crimes? Or did you want to remind me that for your sake, for the sake of all these insignificant nobodies, he stood in my way at every turn, ruining my great endeavors time and again?"

Xue Meng shook his head, pained.

No, Mo Ran. Think about it. Let go of your vicious hatred and look back properly. He once trained you in cultivation and martial arts, trained you in the art of self-defense. He once taught you how to read and write,

taught you poetry and painting. He once learned how to cook just for you, even though he was so clumsy and got cuts all over his hands.

He once… He once waited every day for you to come home, all alone by himself, from nightfall…till the break of dawn…

These words caught in his throat, and at length, Xue Meng could only choke out, "His… His temper is terrible, and his words are harsh, but even I know how well he treated you. So why… How could you…"

Xue Meng raised his head, but having held back so many tears, his throat was even more constricted, and he couldn't continue.

After a long pause, Mo Ran's quiet sigh floated down from the throne. "Yeah. But Xue Meng, did you know?" Mo Ran was clearly exhausted. "He also ended the life of the only person I ever loved. The only one."

A deathly silence hung over them for a good long while.

The pain in Mo Ran's stomach, as his blood and flesh tore and ripped themselves to shreds, was like a blazing fire.

"Still, we were once master and disciple. His body is resting in the Red Lotus Pavilion at the southern peak. He's been very well-preserved and lies there among the lotus blossoms, looking like he's only fallen asleep." Mo Ran caught his breath and forced himself to calm down. When he spoke, his expression remained blank, but his fingers dug into the red sandalwood of his throne's armrest so tightly that his knuckles went white. "His corpse is maintained by my spiritual powers. If you miss him, don't waste your breath here with me. Go now, before I die."

A lump of astringent sweetness swarmed up into Mo Ran's throat; he coughed a couple times, and when he opened his mouth again, his lips and teeth were covered in blood. But his gaze was at ease.

"Go," he said with a rough voice. "Go see him. Without my spiritual powers, he'll turn to dust. If you don't make it before I die, it'll be too late."

Done speaking, he closed his eyes dispiritedly. The poison had reached his heart, bringing with it a torment like a raging inferno.

The agony was so all-consuming that even Xue Meng's anguished, despairing wails felt like they came from far away, like he and Mo Ran were separated by an ocean spanning thousands of miles and his voice traveled

over those waters.

Blood continued to drip from the corners of Mo Ran's lips, and his hands fisted in his sleeves as his muscles spasmed. When he opened his bleary eyes, Xue Meng had long since run off. The kid's qinggong lightness wasn't bad; it wouldn't take him long to reach the southern peak.

He should be able to see Shizun one last time.

Mo Ran pushed himself up, wobbling as he rose to his feet. Using hands flecked with blood, he formed a seal and sent himself to the base of Sisheng Peak's Heaven-Piercing Tower.

It was deep autumn, and the haitang blossoms were in full, abundant bloom. He didn't know why he'd ended up choosing this place to end his sinful life, but with all of the flowers blooming so vibrantly, at least it wouldn't be such a bad tomb.

Mo Ran lay down in that open coffin and looked up to watch the blossoms of the night drift soundlessly as they wilted. Drifting into the coffin, drifting onto his cheeks. Dancing and fluttering, fading away like the events of the past.

In this life, he'd started out as a bastard son who possessed nothing, and after enduring a great deal, he'd become Lord Emperor of the Mortal Realm.

He had blasphemed, and his hands were covered with blood. All that he loved, all that he hated, all that he prayed for, all that he resented—when all was said and done, there was nothing left.

Ultimately, he hadn't even bothered to pen an epitaph for himself with that wild and spirited scrawl of his. There was no shameless "Emperor of the Ages," nor was there something ridiculous like "Deep-Fried" or "Steamed"; he hadn't written a thing. The grave of the first emperor of the cultivation world was, in the end, unmarked.

And so the curtains finally closed on a spectacle that had lasted for a decade.

Many, many hours later, the rebel army invaded the resident palace of the emperor with torches held high. However, what awaited them was an empty Wushan Palace, a Sisheng Peak without a soul, and at the Red Lotus

Pavilion, Xue Meng, who had cried himself numb, slumped over on a floor covered in ashes.

And finally, before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, the long-cold corpse of Mo Weiyu.

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Chapter 2:
This Venerable One Lives

"MY HEART HAS STILLED, and my thoughts turned to ash / Yet unexpectedly, the light of spring shines through the cold night. / Could it be that the heavens pity the blade of grass in the secluded valley? / Yet I fear that the world is unpredictable and full only of hardship."

The warbling sound of a woman's clear voice wafted to his ears, the poetic verses cascading like pearls and jade, but all the sound did was make Mo Ran's head throb. The vein by his brow twitched madly.

"What's with all the noise?! Where'd this wailing banshee even come from?! Servants, kick this bitch off the mountain!"

Only after bellowing this did Mo Ran realize, with a start, that something wasn't right. Wasn't he supposed to be dead?

Hatred, cold, pain, and loneliness coalesced as a stabbing sensation in his chest. Mo Ran's eyes flew open.

Every memory of what had happened right before his death scattered like snow in the winds. He found himself lying on a bed; it wasn't his bed at Sisheng Peak, but a bed carved with a dragon and phoenix, the wood heavily fragrant. The worn bedding was colored pink and purple and embroidered with mandarin ducks—the kind of bed only found in a whorehouse.

Mo Ran froze. He knew where he was. This was the house of accommodation near Sisheng Peak. (This so-called "house of accommodation" just meant "some brothel"—come for the fun, no strings attached.)

In his youth, Mo Ran had gone through a period of debauchery during which he spent his nights at this exact establishment more often than not. But this place had been sold and converted into a wine shop long ago, when he was in his twenties. How, after dying, had he ended up here of all places?

Had he transgressed too terribly in life and wronged too many people, so much so that the King of the Underworld had punished him by making him reincarnate as a prostitute to take customers?

While Mo Ran's imagination ran wild, he casually turned over in bed. Unexpectedly, he came face-to-face with a slumbering person.

What the hell! Why was there a person next to him?! A man, at that, and a totally naked one to boot!

The man had an androgynous appearance with gentle, lovely features that were pleasing to the eye. Mo Ran kept his expression blank, but his heart was full of turmoil. He stared at that pretty boy's slumbering face for a while before it hit him.

Wasn't this the boy toy he'd doted on when he was young? Hadn't he been named…Rong San? Or was it Rong Jiu?

It didn't matter whether it had been San or Jiu; what mattered was that this prostitute had caught a sexually transmitted disease and died so many years ago that by now, even his bones had rotted away. Yet here he was, delicately curled by Mo Ran's side, neck and shoulders dotted all over with blue and purple love bites.

Mo Ran grimaced, lifted the quilt, and took a peek downward. This Rong Jiu or San or whatever—he'd just call him Rong Jiu for now—this Rong Jiu's pretty little body was covered in rope burns, and his pale, tender thighs were still intricately bound with red rope.

Mo Ran stroked his chin. How interesting. Consider: this exquisite rope art, this skilled technique, this familiar scene… Wasn't this his own fucking handiwork?!

Being a cultivator, the concept of rebirth wasn't new to him, and he began to suspect that he had somehow gone back in time. To confirm his suspicions, Mo Ran went to find a copper mirror. The mirror was worn but in good enough condition to vaguely make out his appearance within it.

Mo Ran had been thirty-two when he died, but the face reflected in the mirror was rather young. It was a charming face that exuded a youthful audacity, and it looked no older than fifteen or sixteen.

There was no one else in the room. Thus, after much consideration, the once cruel ruler of the cultivation world, the Despot of Sichuan, Emperor of the Mortal Realm, and Lord of Sisheng Peak, Taxian-jun, Mo Ran himself, expressed his honest thoughts: "Fuck..."

At this, the sleeping Rong Jiu was “fuck”-ed awake.

The pretty thing sat up languidly, thin quilt sliding off his shoulder to reveal an expanse of pale skin. He gathered his long, soft hair and, lifting his peach-blossom eyes smudged with red ink, yawned. “Oh, Mo-gongzi, you’re up early today.”

Mo Ran did not respond. Way back when, he had indeed liked Rong Jiu’s type: delicate and androgynous. But now the thirty-two-year-old Taxian-jun couldn’t figure out what the hell he had been thinking when he found this kind of man attractive.

“Did you not sleep well last night? Nightmare?”

This venerable one fucking died—how’s that for a nightmare?

Rong Jiu thought Mo Ran’s continued silence was the symptom of a bad mood, so he slipped off the bed to stand before the carved window and wrapped his arms around Mo Ran from behind. “Mo-gongzi, pay attention to me,” he sang coyly. “What are you spacing out for?”

Mo Ran’s face turned blue at this embrace. He wanted nothing more than to rip this hussy off of himself and grant that fragile-looking face a couple dozen slaps, but he managed to suppress the urge.

His head was still spinning with uncertainty about the whole situation. After all, if he really had been reborn, then he couldn’t just beat up Rong Jiu out of the blue after spending the previous day being all lovey-dovey with him. That would make it seem like he’d lost his marbles. Definitely out of the question.

Mo Ran arranged his features to put on a pretense of forgetfulness. “What day is it?”

Rong Jiu blinked at him, then smiled. “The fourth of May.”

“Thirty-third year?”

“That was last year. It’s the thirty-fourth year now. They do say that great men tend to be forgetful; Mo-gongzi is no exception.”

The thirty-fourth year… The gears in Mo Ran’s head turned rapidly. This was the year he would turn sixteen, and in which he had been identified as the leader of Sisheng Peak’s long-lost nephew. Overnight, he had gone from being a pathetic, bullied dog to a phoenix on the branch.

Then…had he really been reborn? Or was this just a hollow dream in death?

Rong Jiu smiled. “Mo-gongzi is so hungry, he doesn’t even remember the date. Wait here a moment. I’ll go fetch some food. How do fried youxuan pancakes sound?”

The newly reborn Mo Ran wasn’t sure how to deal with all this yet, but he figured that things ought to be fine if he just followed the same approach as before. And so he thought back to his charismatic manner of those long-gone days and, suppressing his disgust, playfully pinched Rong Jiu’s thigh. “Sounds delicious,” he said. “Bring a bowl of congee, too, and when you get back, I want you to feed me.”

Rong Jiu pulled on some clothes and left, soon returning with a tray, atop which was balanced a bowl of pumpkin congee, two crispy youxuan pancakes, and a plate of appetizers.

Mo Ran happened to be a little hungry and was just about to dig into the pastries when Rong Jiu brushed his hand away. “Allow me to serve Gongzi.”

Rong Jiu picked up a pancake and seated himself on Mo Ran’s lap. He wore nothing but a thin robe, and his smooth-skinned thighs spread wide open as he sat flush against Mo Ran. He even rubbed against him now and again, his intentions self-evident.

Mo Ran gazed at Rong Jiu’s face for a long moment.

“What’re you staring at me for?” Rong Jiu asked in mock-displeasure, thinking he was getting horny again. “The food’s going to get cold.”

Mo Ran was silent for another moment. As he recalled the “good deed” Rong Jiu had done him behind his back in his previous lifetime, the corners of his lips curved into a sweet smile.

The great Taxian-jun had done plenty of gross things. There was nothing too gross for him so long as he felt like doing it. This right here would be just putting on a show—mere child’s play.

Mo Ran casually leaned back against the chair and smiled. “Sit.”

“I…I’m already sitting?”

“You know very well where I’m telling you to sit.”

Rong Jiu blushed and sputtered. “Why the rush, Gongzi? Why not finish eating fir—ah!”

Before Rong Jiu could even finish his sentence, Mo Ran pulled him forward and pressed him back down. Rong Jiu’s hands shook and knocked the bowl of congee to the floor. “Mo-gongzi,” he managed between gasps, “the bowl…”

“Leave it.”

“B-but you should still eat first…nngh…ah…”

“Am I not eating right now?” Mo Ran held his waist, the lovely visage of Rong Jiu with his head flung back reflected in his pitch-black pupils.

In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, he’d liked to kiss those captivating red lips during these moments of intimacy. After all, Rong Jiu was pretty and knew just the right words to say. It would have been a lie to say that Mo Ran had never felt anything for him.

But now that Mo Ran knew what treacherous things those lips had done, he found them unbearably foul and had absolutely no interest in kissing them.

The thirty-two-year-old Mo Ran was different from the fifteen-year-old Mo Ran in many respects. For example, the fifteen-year-old him had still known gentleness in love and intimacy. However, the thirty-two-year-old him knew only violence.

After Mo Ran was done, he looked at Rong Jiu, passed out from getting fucked to within an inch of his life, with an undercurrent of something dark in his gaze. As he looked, his eyes curved faintly, carrying a hint of that sweet smile. He was incredibly good-looking when he smiled, his eyes a bold, rich black with, from certain angles, a sheen of arrogant purple. Still smiling, he dragged Rong Jiu onto the bed by his hair and casually picked up a shard of the broken bowl from the ground, which he held by Rong Jiu’s face.

He’d always avenged every grievance done to him; this time would be no different.

As Mo Ran thought about how well he had taken care of Rong Jiu in his last lifetime, how he’d even thought about buying Rong Jiu’s freedom,

and how Rong Jiu had repaid him by scheming against him with others, his eyes couldn't help but curve more deeply into a smile, and he pressed the shard against Rong Jiu's cheek.

This person's body was his livelihood. Without this face, he would have nothing. He would be forced to wander the streets like a dog, to crawl on the ground, be kicked, and suffer all kinds of spurning and abuse… Mo Ran was so delighted by this mere thought that even the disgust he felt from fucking Rong Jiu vanished like smoke.

His smile became even more lovely. His hand pressed down ever so lightly, and a thread of blood, captivatingly scarlet, seeped forth. The unconscious Rong Jiu seemed to feel it and made a low, pained sound. With his tears clinging to his eyelashes, it made for quite a pitiful sight.

Mo Ran's hand jerked to a stop. A dear friend had come to mind.

Suddenly, he realized what he had just been about to do. It was a few dazed moments before finally, slowly, he lowered his hand.

He had done so much evil that it had become habitual. He'd even forgotten that he was now reborn.

At this moment, all those things had yet to happen. Irrevocable mistakes had not yet been committed, and that person…still lived. There was no need to walk the same cruel path. He could do it over.

Mo Ran sat down, one foot propped on the bed, and absentmindedly toyed with the piece of broken porcelain in his hand. Noticing a greasy pancake that still sat on the table, he grabbed it, peeled off the wax paper, and tore into it with his teeth, eating until crumbs flew everywhere and his lips grew shiny with grease.

Youxuan pancakes were a specialty of this brothel. They weren't that good—kind of flavorless actually, especially compared to the delicacies Mo Ran would taste in the future—but after this place went under, Mo Ran would never again get to eat one. However, in this moment, even after everything that had happened in the past, here he was, once more tasting this familiar flavor.

The unreal feeling of having been reborn lessened with every swallow. By the time he finished the pancake, his mind was finally clear of the stupor it had been in ever since he woke.

He really had been reborn. Everything hateful in his life, everything he couldn't take back, all of it, had not yet come to pass. He had not yet killed his uncle and aunt, not yet razed seventy-two cities to the ground, not yet betrayed his teacher and ancestors, not yet gotten married, not yet…

No one had died yet.

Mo Ran savored the taste in his mouth, licking along his teeth and feeling the thread of joy in his chest balloon rapidly into a feverish excitement. He'd rebuked heaven and earth in his last life, experimenting with all three of the forbidden techniques of the mortal realm. He had mastered two of these three; only the last, Rebirth, had eluded him, despite his natural aptitude.

Unexpectedly, that which he had failed to obtain in life had, in death, fallen effortlessly into his lap.

All the distaste, the revulsion, the desolation, the loneliness, all of his complicated feelings from his previous life remained locked in his chest. The sight of the army marching on Sisheng Peak, the ten thousand fathoms of torch fire, was fresh in his mind.

At that time, he really hadn't wanted to live anymore. Everyone had said that his very existence cursed all who came close to him and that he was fated to die alone. Everyone had turned their backs on him. Toward the end, even Mo Ran himself had felt like the walking dead, apathetic and isolated.

He didn't know what and where things had gone wrong, for an irredeemably wicked person like himself to get the chance to redo everything after ending his own life.

Why destroy Rong Jiu's face over such a measly grudge from so long ago? Rong Jiu loved money. Mo Ran would just not pay him this time, and on top of that, he'd take some silver to teach him a lesson. As for Rong Jiu's life—he didn't want that burden just yet.

"I'm letting you off easy, Rong Jiu." Mo Ran said this with a smile and tossed the porcelain shard out the window.

He then proceeded to clear out Rong Jiu's jewels and valuables, tucking all of them into his pouch, before unhurriedly getting dressed and tidying himself up. Finally, he leisurely strolled out of the establishment.

Uncle, Aunt, Cousin Xue Meng, Shizun, and… Mo Ran's eyes softened at the thought of one last person. *Shige, I'm coming.*

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Chapter 3:
This Venerable One's Shige

HM... Since Mo Ran's soul had been transported back in time, perhaps his cultivation had come along for the ride?

Mo Ran recited an incantation and felt the spiritual energy in his body surge forth. Though abundant, it wasn't strong. That was to say, his cultivation had not carried over.

No matter. He was smart, perceptive, and blessed with innate talent; he could just cultivate all over again, no big deal. Rebirth was already a blessed occurrence of unparalleled proportions—it stood to reason that there would be some small imperfections here and there. As Mo Ran thought this, he quickly rearranged his gloomy, fierce expression into one more appropriate for a fifteen-year-old youth and cheerfully headed back toward his sect.

It was the middle of summer. Horse-drawn carriages sped past, wheels rolling, and no one paid any attention to the fifteen-year-old Mo Ran. Only the occasional village woman, taking a break from tending the fields and looking up to wipe her sweat, noticed this exceptionally handsome youth and stared a bit. Mo Ran returned those stares with his own, smiling as he did so, until those married women blushed bright red and looked away.

Around evening, Mo Ran arrived at Wuchang Town. The town wasn't far from Sisheng Peak, whose towering peaks loomed in the distance, framed by clouds lit afire by the bloodred setting sun. Feeling a little hungry, he headed into a restaurant. As he glanced at the menu and knocked on the counter, he placed a quick order. "Shopkeeper, one bon bon chicken, a plate of spicy fuqi feipian beef tripe in chili sauce, two catties of wine, and a plate of sliced beef, please."

This establishment was a popular rest stop and was currently bustling with activity. A storyteller was on the stage, shaking his fan and telling the story of Sisheng Peak in an animated manner, spit flying everywhere. Mo Ran picked a booth by a window and listened as he ate.

"As I'm sure everyone already knows, the cultivation world is divided

into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Today we'll talk about the greatest sect in the lower cultivation realm, Sisheng Peak. Did you know that a hundred years ago, our Wuchang Town was a poor and desolate place due to its proximity to the entrance of the ghost realm? No one dared go out after dark. If they really needed to travel at night, they had to ring an exorcism bell and sprinkle incense ash and paper money while chanting, 'People barred by mountains, demons barred by paper,' and pass along as quickly as they could. But these days, our town thrives and flourishes, no different from anywhere else, and it's all thanks to Sisheng Peak's care. This righteous sect stands right at the gate to the ghost realm, between the boundary of yin and yang. Even though the sect was established not that long ago…"

Mo Ran had heard this history so many times that his ears had damn near grown calluses, and so he started glancing around outside the window instead. It just so happened that at that moment, a stall had been set up below the window. There, several strangers from out of town were dressed in cultivator garb and carrying a cage covered with a black cloth as they performed streetside tricks.

This was much more interesting than the storyteller's tale, and Mo Ran's attention was drawn to it.

"Come one, come all! Take a look at these pixiu cubs, fierce mythical beasts we tamed to obediently perform tricks—and even do math! It's not easy traveling to perform chivalrous deeds; everyone spare some tips and stick around. Come watch the first trick—pixiu abacus!"

With a flourish, the cultivators ripped away the black cloth to reveal a couple of human-faced, bear-bodied monsters in the cage.

Mo Ran was speechless. *Just a couple of meek fuzzy bear cubs?! And you actually dare to claim that they're pixiu?!*

That was quite some bullshit right there. Only donkey brains would believe it.

But Mo Ran's worldview was soon widened as some twenty or thirty donkey brains gathered to watch, cheering and clapping. They drew the attention of everyone in the restaurant as well, making things quite awkward for the storyteller.

"The current leader of Sisheng Peak is a man known far and wide for

his strength and brilliance—"

"Nice! Again!"

Encouraged, the storyteller glanced toward the owner of the voice—only to find a customer whose face glowed red with excitement, but whose gaze was locked not on himself but on the street performers.

"Oh? The pixiu is doing math on an abacus?"

"Wow, quite impressive!"

"Good show! Make the pixiu juggle apples again!"

The entire restaurant was laughing as everyone gathered by the windows to watch the scene below.

The storyteller pathetically tried to carry on. "The master is best known for that fan of his. He…"

"Ah ha ha ha, that light-colored pixiu wants to eat the apple. Look at it rolling around on the ground!"

The storyteller wiped his face with a towel, his lips quivering with anger.

Mo Ran pursed his lips in a smile and leisurely called out from behind the bead curtain. "Forget Sisheng Peak, tell a story from *Eighteen Caresses* instead. I guarantee it'll pull back everyone's attention."

The storyteller didn't know that the person behind the curtain was one of the young masters of Sisheng Peak himself, Mo Ran. He gathered all the moral integrity he had to stutter out, "V-vulgar stories are not f-fit for an elegant hall."

Mo Ran laughed. "You're calling *this* place an elegant hall? How are you not embarrassed?"

A burst of noise came from below.

"Ah! What a fast horse!"

"Must be a cultivator from Sisheng Peak!"

In the midst of the chatter, a black horse galloped from the direction of Sisheng Peak and, in a flash, charged into the streetside circus.

There were two people on the horse. One wore a black bamboo hat and

was shrouded in a black cloak that covered them so completely, it was impossible to tell their age or gender. The other was a thirty- or forty-year-old woman with rough hands and a weathered face.

The woman started crying as soon as she saw the man-bears. She scrambled off the horse and stumbled toward them, kneeling to embrace one of them in her arms as she wailed. “My son! Oh, my son—”

The audience was stumped.

“Eh? Aren’t these pixiu cubs?” someone muttered while scratching his head. “Why’s this woman calling it her son?”

“Maybe it’s a pixiu mother?”

“Aiyo, that’d be quite something, then, if the females can even take on human form.”

These villagers had no relevant knowledge or experience and were only babbling nonsense, but Mo Ran instantly figured out what was going on.

Rumor had it that some rogue cultivators liked to abduct children, rip their tongues out so they couldn’t talk, burn their skin off with boiling water, and then stick animal hides on their bloodied bodies so that once the blood had congealed, child and fur would become one, making them look just like a monster. These children couldn’t speak or write and had no choice but to suffer abuse and obediently perform tricks like “pixiu abacus”; any resistance only earned them a beating.

No wonder he hadn’t sensed any demonic energy. These “pixiu” weren’t monsters at all, but actual living humans.

While Mo Ran was thinking to himself, the person in the black cloak said something in low tones to the cultivators, who flew into a rage.

“Apologize? That ain’t in my vocabulary!”

“So what if you’re from Sisheng Peak?”

“Mind your own damn business! Beat him up!”

They pounced on the black-cloaked person for a thrashing.

“Aiyo.” As Mo Ran watched his fellow disciple get beat up, he only let out a low chuckle. “How scary.”

He had zero intentions of helping out. Even in his previous life, he’d

always loathed the righteous and meddlesome ways of his sect. The lot of them rushed to throw themselves at any trouble that cropped up like so many idiots. They would even bother with some minor inconvenience like Mrs. Wang's cat getting stuck in a tree. Every single last member of the entire sect—from the leader all the way down to the servants—was a dimwit.

There were countless injustices in the world, so what was the point of caring? It was enough to exhaust a person to death.

"They're fighting, they're fighting! Ho! What a punch!"

Within and without the restaurant, everyone gathered to spectate.

"So many of you ganging up on one person! Aren't you ashamed?!"

"Watch out behind you, sir! Aiya! Close call! Wah—"

"Nice dodge!"

These people loved a good fight, but Mo Ran didn't care to watch. He'd seen plenty of bloodshed; to him, the events currently unfolding were like unto a fly's buzzing. He lazily dusted peanut crumbs off his clothes and got up to leave.

Downstairs, the cultivators and the black-cloaked person had reached a stalemate, swords swishing. Crossing his arms, Mo Ran leaned against the restaurant's door. All it took was one glance to make him click his tongue in annoyance. What a disgrace.

Everyone from Sisheng Peak was a fierce fighter, each the equal of ten men, but the black-cloaked person was a pathetic combatant. Even when they were dragged off the horse, surrounded, and kicked, they held back.

Instead, this person cried out politely, "Honorable men speak with their mouths, not their fists. I'm trying to reason with you—why won't you listen?!"

The cultivators were as speechless as Mo Ran.

The cultivators were thinking, *The hell? This person's already been so soundly whipped and they're still preaching that nonsense? Is this what they call "mantou for brains, all empty inside"?*

But Mo Ran's face changed abruptly as, for a second, his head spun. He held his breath, eyes wide with disbelief. That voice…

“Shi Mei!” Mo Ran shouted and rushed forward, agitated. He let loose an attack filled with spiritual power that instantly knocked away five of the jianghu cultivator swindlers and knelt on the ground to help up the black-cloaked figure, who was covered in muddy boot marks. His voice couldn’t help but tremble slightly as he said, “Shi Mei, is that you?”

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Chapter 4:
This Venerable One's Cousin

THIS SHI MEI was not that kind of shimei.[4] Shi Mei was in fact male, and moreover, considering when he'd joined the sect, he was technically Mo Ran's shixiong. The reason he had such an unfortunate name was the leader of Sisheng Peak's lack of erudition.

Shi Mei was an orphan, and the sect leader had found him in the wild. The boy had been a weak and sickly child, and so the sect leader had thought to give him a humble name, as humble names bring an easier life.

The child had been astonishingly pretty, like a darling little girl, lovable and charming. After much thought, the leader had eventually come up with the name Xue Ya, a simple given name that just meant little girl.

As Xue Ya grew older and older, so too had he grown more and more beautiful. He possessed a slim figure, and the tips of his brows and the corners of his eyes were well-shaped, lending him a graceful mien. The overall effect was that of a striking and peerless natural beauty.

The crude, uncultured farmers of the villages wouldn't think it wrong to use a name like Xue Ya, but had anyone ever heard of a legendary beauty whose name was a homonym for "Dog Balls" or "Steel Cock"?

The boy's fellow sect disciples hadn't thought it appropriate and gradually stopped calling him Xue Ya. But since it had been a name bestowed by the sect leader, they hadn't dared presume to change it, and so they'd half-jokingly started calling him "shimei" instead.

It was shimei this, shimei that, until at last the sect leader shook out his long sleeves and kindly suggested, "Xue Ya, why don't you change your name to Shi Mei once and for all? What do you think of using the character 'mei' from the word meng mei?"[5]

He'd actually had the gall to ask. What normal person wouldn't abhor such a name? Nevertheless, Shi Mei was sweet-tempered by nature, and when he saw the sect leader watching him with excited cheerfulness, clearly thinking that he'd done him an amazing service, Shi Mei didn't have the

heart to decline. Even if he felt aggrieved, he couldn't embarrass the sect leader, so he knelt and accepted the name with grace. From that day on, his name became Shi Mei.

The figure in the black cloak coughed a few times before finally catching his breath. His gaze fell on Mo Ran. "Hm? A-Ran? What are you doing here?"

Behind a thin layer of organza, a pair of eyes, gentle as spring water and bright as the night stars, pierced the depths of Mo Ran's heart. With this one look, the seal on Taxian-jun's long-buried boyhood feelings and tender affections was broken.

This was Shi Mei. There could be no mistake.

Mo Ran was a scoundrel. In his past life, he'd played around with many men and women. That he hadn't died from too much sex had come as a surprise even to him. But the only person he'd ever given his heart to was one he'd never dared to touch.

He and Shi Mei had been close, and there had been a faint hint of romance in their relationship. However, up until Shi Mei's death, Mo Ran had only ever held his hand, and the one time their lips had brushed in a kiss, it had been an accident.

Mo Ran felt that he was dirty and sullied while Shi Mei was pure and sweet. In other words, Mo Ran wasn't fit to be with him.

In life, Mo Ran had treasured and cherished Shi Mei, and he had done so all the more after Shi Mei's death. In death, Shi Mei had become Taxian-jun's unattainable white moonlight, but no matter how desperately Taxian-jun had tried to cling to his memories of Shi Mei, the deceased belonged to the past, returned irretrievably to the earth with not a trace left behind.

But in this moment, Shi Mei stood in front of him, once more living and breathing. It was only with great effort and all of Mo Ran's willpower that he held back his emotions and restrained himself.

Mo Ran helped Shi Mei up and patted away the dust on his cloak, heart aching with an almost physical pain. "If I hadn't been here, they would have bullied you even more! Why didn't you hit back?"

"I wanted to try reasoning with them first…"

“You can’t reason with these people! Are you injured? Where does it hurt?”

Shi Mei coughed. “A-Ran, I…I’m fine.”

Mo Ran turned to the cultivators, expression ferocious. “You dare lay hands on someone from Sisheng Peak? Some nerve you’ve got there.”

“A-Ran… Let it go…”

“Didn’t you guys want a fight? Come on, then! Fight me!”

The group of cultivators had taken only a single blow from Mo Ran, but that one blow had made them sufficiently aware that his cultivation skills were far beyond theirs. They only knew how to pick on those weaker than themselves, and so they retreated, afraid to brawl with him.

Shi Mei sighed. “A-Ran, cease this quarreling. It’s best to forgive and forget.”

Mo Ran turned back to Shi Mei and couldn’t help but feel a forlorn sort of distress in his heart as the corners of his eyes got all hot. Shi Mei had always been kindhearted. He’d held no resentment, no hatred, not even in his last moments. He’d even tried to persuade Mo Ran to not hate their shizun, who could clearly have saved Shi Mei’s life but who had instead chosen to stand there and do nothing. “But they…”

“I’m okay, though. See? Nothing happened. Having fewer problems is better than having more. Please, listen to this shige.”

Mo Ran sighed. “All right, I’ll listen to you. I’ll listen to everything you say.” He shook his head, then shot a glare at the cultivators. “You hear that? My shige has pleaded for leniency on your behalf! Hurry up and get lost! What are you still here for? Are you waiting for me to escort you away?”

“Yes, yes! We’re leaving, we’re leaving!”

“Hang on,” Shi Mei said to the group.

The cultivators assumed that Shi Mei wasn’t about to let them go easily, given that prior thrashing. Thus, they knelt on the ground and bowed. “Xianjun, Xianjun! We were in the wrong. We were ignorant. Please let us go!”

“You didn’t listen to me earlier when I tried to reason with you.” Shi Mei let out a sigh. “You kidnapped someone’s child and broke their parents’ hearts. How can you live with this on your conscience?”

“We’re sorry! We’re sorry! Xianjun, we made a mistake! We will never do it again! We will never do it again!”

“From now on you must live honest lives. No more evil deeds, do you understand?”

“Of course! You’ve taught us a great lesson! We—we’ve learned our lesson! We’ve learned our lesson!”

“If that’s the case, then please apologize to this madam. And make sure her children get the treatment they need.”

With the incident thus concluded, Mo Ran helped Shi Mei on to his horse, then rented another one from a stable. The pair headed back to their sect, riding side by side.

The moon shone high in the sky, its light piercing through the leaves to scatter onto the footpath. As they went, a euphoria began to grow within Mo Ran. He’d initially thought he wouldn’t be able to see Shi Mei until he was back at Sisheng Peak—he hadn’t expected Shi Mei to come down the mountain to right this wrong and run into him by chance. This only cemented Mo Ran’s belief that he and Shi Mei really were meant to be.

Even though he and Shi Mei weren’t technically an item at present, they’d already kissed in their past life. All signs indicated that it was going to be smooth sailing in this lifetime as well; it was all just a matter of time.

The only thing he needed to worry about was protecting Shi Mei. He would make sure that things didn’t happen like they had back then, when Shi Mei died in Mo Ran’s arms…

Shi Mei, who had no way to know Mo Ran had been reborn, chatted with him as he usually did while they returned. Soon, they arrived at the foot of Sisheng Peak.

Who would have thought that, in the dead of the night, a person would be standing in front of the mountain’s gate, glaring at them with a thunderous gaze.

“Mo Ran! You finally remembered to come back?!”

"Eh?" Mo Ran looked up. *Oho, such an angry little darling of the heavens.*

It was none other than a youthful Xue Meng.

Compared to the one Mo Ran had seen before his death, this fifteen- or sixteen-year-old version was much more haughtily dashing. He was dressed in a set of light armor with a black base and blue trim, his high ponytail tied with a silver hairpiece. A belt decorated with a lion's head was fastened around his strong, slender waist, and gaiters were wrapped about his wrists and ankles. The slim scimitar on his back gleamed with a cold light, and the quiver by his left arm glittered silver.

Mo Ran sighed to himself, rendering judgment in his head: *Hm, flashy.*

Xue Meng, whether a teen or a grown-up, really was just *flashy*.

Just look at him: Instead of sleeping, he was dressed in full armor. Whatever for? Was he here to spread his tailfeathers for a peacock mating ritual?

For all that Mo Ran disliked Xue Meng, the feeling was entirely mutual.

Mo Ran was an illegitimate child. When he was little, he hadn't even known who his father was. He'd gotten by working odd jobs at a pleasure house in Xiangtan. Only when he was fourteen had he been found by his relatives and brought to Sisheng Peak.

Xue Meng, on the other hand, was the young master of Sisheng Peak, as well as Mo Ran's younger cousin. Xue Meng had been a prodigy from a young age, hailed by everyone as the darling of the heavens, son of the phoenix. An average cultivator spent their first three years learning cultivation basics and took at least ten years to form a spiritual core. With Xue Meng's innate talent, it had taken him only five years to achieve all that. The accomplishment had delighted his parents to no end and garnered him much praise from everyone else.

But in Mo Ran's eyes, whether you were talking about a phoenix or a chicken, a peacock or a duck, in the end, they were all birds. The only difference lay in the length of their feathers.

Thus, Mo Ran thought of Xue Meng as a squawking bird while Xue

Meng thought of Mo Ran as a dumb mutt.

Perhaps it ran in the family, but Mo Ran was shockingly gifted as well, even more so than Xue Meng. When Mo Ran first arrived, Xue Meng had considered himself superior by far. He was more refined, better educated, better at martial arts, and more handsome—nothing like his illiterate, half-assed, hooligan of a cousin.

Thus, this narcissistic little phoenix ordered his attendants, "Listen up, this Mo Ran is an incompetent slacker, a total freeloader off the streets. You are not allowed to pay him any attention. Just pretend he's a dog."

The attendants toadied right up to him, saying, "Young master is right. That Mo Ran is already fourteen years old. If he starts cultivating now, it'll take him ten years to grasp the basics, twenty to form his spiritual core. By then, the young master will have ascended, and he'll just have to watch from the ground."

Xue Meng sneered, quite pleased. "Twenty? Hmph, I doubt that useless piece of trash will be able to form a spiritual core at all, even if he spends his whole life trying."

Nobody could've predicted that this "useless piece of trash" would gain his spiritual core after a single effortless year of studying with his shizun.

The little phoenix felt like he'd been struck by lightning. Such a harsh truth was hard to swallow. And so, he'd stuck needles into a voodoo doll of Mo Ran, secretly cursing the other to slip and fall when traveling by sword and to trip over his words when reciting incantations. Every time he saw Mo Ran, the little phoenix Xue Meng made sure to roll his eyes and *hmph* loud enough to be heard three miles away.

As Mo Ran recalled these childhood memories, he couldn't help but narrow his eyes in amusement. It had been so long since he'd been able to enjoy such trivial things. After ten years of loneliness, even past unpleasantness was delightful to him.

Noticing Xue Meng, Shi Mei dismounted his horse and took off his black-veiled bamboo hat to reveal his peerlessly stunning face. It really made sense that he dressed that way when he went out by himself. Just one sideways peek and Mo Ran could already feel elation and desire coursing

through him. This person was simply too alluring, possessed of a beauty that was out of this world.

"Young master," Shi Mei greeted Xue Meng.

Xue Meng nodded. "You're back? Did you take care of the man-bear incident?"

Shi Mei smiled. "It's been taken care of, all thanks to A-Ran's help."

Xue Meng's proud and lofty gaze, sharp as a blade, swept over to Mo Ran before flicking away. He furrowed his brow, face twisting in disdain, as if looking at Mo Ran for even another moment would sully his eyes. "Shi Mei, go back and rest. Stop associating with him; he's a ruffian with bad habits. You'll only learn awful things, hanging around him."

Mo Ran didn't take this lying down. "If Shi Mei shouldn't learn from me, then is he supposed to learn from you?" he asked mockingly. "Dressed in full armor in the middle of the night, strutting about with your tail feathers all fanned out like a bird. Darling of the heavens? More like *princess* of the heavens, ha ha ha!"

Xue Meng flew into a rage. "Watch your mouth, Mo Ran! This is my home! Who do you think you are?!"

Mo Ran contemplated this for a moment, counting off on his fingers as he did so. "I'm your older cousin. If you think about it, I'm higher ranked than you, actually."

It was like Xue Meng had been splattered with a face full of dog shit. He scowled disdainfully. "Who wants a cousin like you?" he snapped. "Don't flatter yourself! In my eyes, you're nothing but a dog rolling in the mud!"

Xue Meng was someone who really liked to call other people dogs. *Whelp, mutt, son of a bitch, raised by dogs*—such insults came to him with ease.

Mo Ran picked his ear nonchalantly; he'd long since grown used to these things. But next to them, Shi Mei was feeling rather awkward. He said some soothing words in a low voice, and with a sneer, Xue Meng finally shut that eminent beak of his.

Shi Mei smiled. "Young master, it's so late," he said gently. "Are you waiting for someone?"

“What else would I be doing? Moon-viewing?”

Mo Ran burst out laughing. “No wonder you’re all dressed up—you’re waiting for a date! Ay, who’s the unlucky one? I pity her. Ha ha ha ha ha.”

Xue Meng’s expression grew so dark that it could’ve passed for charcoal. “You!” he snapped.

“Me?”

“I’m waiting for *you*! What now, huh?”

Mo Ran was shocked silent.

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Chapter 5:
This Venerable One Isn't a Thief

LOYALTY HALL was brightly lit. Shi Mei had taken his leave of them a while back, and so it was just Mo Ran and Xue Meng. Mo Ran followed Xue Meng into the hall, and upon seeing the scene within, his confusion immediately cleared.

So it was Rong Jiu, that pansy. He'd actually had the nerve to come to Sisheng Peak to complain about the money Mo Ran had stolen from him.

Rong Jiu was currently sobbing into the embrace of a big, burly man, the picture of a weeping beauty. At Mo Ran and Xue Meng's entrance, his sobs grew three pitches higher, as if he might foam at the mouth and swoon if it not for the man's arms around him.

A dainty lady sat on the hall's dais behind a bead curtain, clearly at a complete loss. Mo Ran didn't spare the repulsive pair so much as a glance as he instead greeted her. "Aunt, I'm back."

This woman was the lady of Sisheng Peak, Madam Wang. Unlike those heroines who were every bit a match for their male counterparts, she was a meek homemaker who didn't dabble in matters outside the sect. She had absolutely no idea how to deal with this without her husband around. "A-Ran," she said timidly, "you've finally returned."

Mo Ran only smiled at her, acting as if the complainant duo weren't even there. "It's so late, yet you're still up, Aunt. Did you need me for something?"

"Mn. You see, this Rong-gongzi says that you… That you took his money?" Madam Wang had a rather thin face and was thus too embarrassed to say that Mo Ran had gone whoring. Instead, she chose to address the minor offense.

Mo Ran's eyes curved as he smiled. "Really? It's not like I'm short on money; why would I need to take theirs? Besides, I don't recognize either of these people. Do I know you guys?"

The burly man sneered. "Yours truly is surnamed Chang, and I'm the

eldest son of my family. As a businessman, minor formalities matter little to me; you may call me Chang Da."

"Ah, so it's Da Chang-gongzi,"[6] Mo Ran said as he smiled, having purposefully flipped his name around. "It's an honor to finally meet you. Please excuse my rudeness. And this other gentleman is…"

Big Intestine-gongzi scoffed. "Hah, Mo-gongzi sure is fond of acting the fool. This may be our first meeting, but in the last month, you've spent half your nights in Jiu-er's bed. And you claim not to recognize him—have you gone blind?"

Mo Ran was entirely unperturbed, and he continued to smile as he glanced at Rong Jiu. "What's this? Are you trying to slander me? I'm a decent, honorable person. Of course I've never slept with some San-er or Jiu-er."

Rong Jiu's face was red with anger, but he continued to nestle against Chang Da's chest, sobbing. "M-Mo-gongzi, I know my status is low and unseemly… If you hadn't exploited me so cruelly, I wouldn't have come calling. But to be treated in such a way, I… I…"

"I really truly do not know you," Mo Ran said in a tone as if he were the one who'd been wronged. "I can't even tell if you're male or female—how could we have met before?"

"You patronized my business just last night! How could you be so cold? Chang-gongzi, Chang-gongzi, you have to get justice on my behalf." Rong Jiu burrowed even deeper into Chang Da's arms as his crying ratcheted up a notch.

Off to the side, Xue Meng's entire face was ashen, his frown twitching as he listened to this absurdity. If not for the self-restraint of his upbringing as a young master, he would've kicked this repulsive pair off the mountain long ago.

Big Intestine-gongzi stroked Rong Jiu's hair and soothed him with some murmured words before raising his head. "Madam Wang, Sisheng Peak is a virtuous, upright sect, but this Mo-gongzi is vulgar and despicable!" he declared threateningly. "Jiu-er works hard for his money, all to buy his own freedom as soon as possible. But this cretin! As if mistreating Jiu-er wasn't enough, he even stole Jiu-er's hard-earned savings! The Chang family are not

cultivators, but we *are* wealthy, and we've been traders for generations. If your sect doesn't satisfactorily account for itself today, you'll find yourselves facing no end of trouble in Sichuan!"

Madam Wang was flustered. "Ah… Chang-gongzi, please calm down. I—I…"

Mo Ran sneered to himself. The Chang family were salt merchants and ludicrously loaded. Who would believe that the eldest son of that family couldn't afford to buy Rong Jiu's freedom? That he would let his "Jiu-er" earn his way himself? This smelled fishy, to say the least.

Outwardly, however, his smile remained fixed. "Ah, so Big Intestine-bro is the son of Yizhou's affluent merchant family. You're impressive and commanding, as expected. How admirable. How very admirable!"

Big Intestine-gongzi looked quite smug. "Hmph, so you do know your place after all. Why don't you make this easy on yourself and fess up, then? Where are Jiu-er's things? Hurry up and return them."

"I'm curious, though," Mo Ran said, still smiling. "Your Jiu-er has so many guests every day. Even if he did lose something, why am *I* being blamed?"

"You!" Big Intestine-gongzi gritted his teeth, sneering. "Fine, fine, fine. I just knew you would try to wriggle out of this! Madam Wang, as you've just seen, Mo-gongzi refused to be reasonable and come clean. I'm not going to waste my breath on him anymore. You're the one in charge—you decide!"

Madam Wang knew little of such affairs, and her words stumbled over each other in her nervousness. "I… A-Ran… Meng-er…"

Unwilling to let his mother be put on the spot, Xue Meng stepped forward. "Chang-gongzi, Sisheng Peak has strict disciplinary rules. If your accusations turn out to be true—if Mo Ran indeed violated our rules against greed and promiscuity—we will naturally mete out severe punishment. However, it's your word against his. Have you any evidence?"

Big Intestine-gongzi smirked. "I just *knew* your sect would pull this. That's why we rushed to get here before Mo Ran arrived in order to confront Madam Wang." He cleared his throat. "All of you, listen well: Jiu-er lost two units of pearls, ten gold ingots, a pair of gold plum-blossom bracelets, a pair

of jade hairpins, and a jade butterfly pendant. Search Mo Ran for these items and the truth of my accusations will be made clear."

"What right do you have to search my body?" Mo Ran objected.

"Hmph, sounds like a guilty conscience to me." Big Intestine-gongzi lifted his chin pompously. "Madam Wang, what are Sisheng Peak's punishments for the crimes of theft and lechery?"

"Um…my husband has always been the one in charge of sect matters," Madam Wang answered quietly. "I genuinely…do not know…"

"Dubious, how dubious. I think Madam Wang is purposefully playing dumb to shield her nephew. Heh, who would've thought that Sisheng Peak was actually such a corrupt, filthy place—"

"That's quite enough out of you. My aunt already *told* you she's not used to making these kinds of decisions. Are you quite done bullying a woman?" Mo Ran cut in, finally fed up with this blathering. Even the carefree grin that usually graced his face had somewhat faded. He shot a sidelong glare at the nauseating couple. "Fine, search me, then. But what happens if you find nothing and all this turns out to be slander against my sect?"

"Then I will promptly apologize to Mo-gongzi."

"Sure," Mo Ran agreed easily enough. "Just one thing. If you're wrong, then as an apology, you have to crawl off Sisheng Peak on your hands and knees."

Mo Ran's confidence made a seed of doubt take root within Big Intestine-gongzi's heart. He'd grown up holding cultivators in high regard, though he himself unfortunately had no talent for cultivation. A few days ago, on learning that his old paramour Rong Jiu had somehow earned Mo Ran's favor, he'd made a bargain with him. Rong Jiu would find an opening to steal Mo Ran's cultivation progress, and in exchange, Big Intestine-gongzi would buy his freedom. Not only that, he'd promised to take Rong Jiu into his household and to take care of him for life.

Big Intestine-gongzi longed for cultivation, and Rong Jiu coveted riches. The pair of scoundrels were well-matched in their collusion.

In Mo Ran's previous life, he had fallen for their scheme. He'd gotten

even with them in the end, but not before suffering quite a bit. This time around, their ploy had entirely failed to bear fruit, for Mo Ran had done a sudden about-face—and for no apparent reason either. Mere days ago, he'd still been in a drunken stupor, nestled tenderly in Rong Jiu's arms and going "Jiu-er this" and "Jiu-er that." But this morning, he'd brutally fucked Rong Jiu twice, unexpectedly taken all his belongings and valuables, and run off.

Big Intestine-gongzi was naturally furious and had dragged Rong Jiu to Sisheng Peak to complain. This salt merchant gongzi was a shrewd businessman; he figured that if he busted Mo Ran, then he could force Madam Wang to disperse Mo Ran's cultivation. He'd come prepared with a cultivation-absorbing jade pendant to gather some easy pickings, which he would later on assimilate into his own spiritual reservoir.

But as he looked at Mo Ran now, Big Intestine-gongzi hesitated. Mo Ran was a crafty fellow. What if he'd already sold the stolen goods and was just waiting to pull one over on him? Then again, things had come to this point, and it would be a waste to give up at this point. Maybe Mo Ran was just bluffing…

While he stewed in these thoughts, Mo Ran had gone ahead and started stripping. He took off his outer robe, casually tossed it aside, and gestured in invitation, smiling. "Go ahead and search me. Take your time."

After all that racket, in the end, they found nothing but some spare change.

Big Intestine-gongzi's expression entirely transformed. "Impossible! You're definitely pulling some kind of trick!"

Mo Ran narrowed his dark, purple-tinged eyes and stroked his chin. "You've turned my robe inside-out ten times, and you've touched me all over a ton as well. There's nothing left to do short of getting me totally naked, and you're still not giving up?"

"Mo Ran, you—"

Mo Ran had a sudden realization. "Ah, I get it! Big Intestine-gongzi, could it be that you've been lusting after my good looks and put on this whole show just to take advantage of me and cop a feel?"

Big Intestine-gongzi was so enraged that he was nearly about to pass out; his whole face was red with anger, and while he pointed at Mo Ran, he

was unable to manage a single word.

Xue Meng, watching from the side, had long since hit the limit of his patience. He might have disapproved of Mo Ran, but Mo Ran was a member of Sisheng Peak, and outsiders had no right to degrade him.

Xue Meng strode forward with not a trace of politeness, raised his hand, and unhesitatingly broke Big Intestine-gongzi's finger. "We've humored you for half the night," he admonished him. "But it turns out you were just making trouble out of nothing!"

Big Intestine-gongzi howled in pain and cradled his finger. "A-all of you! You're in on it together! No wonder nothing was on Mo Ran—you must've hidden it all! You strip too! Let me search you!"

Xue Meng flew into a humiliation-driven rage. Someone had actually dared to order *him* to strip! "Shameless! You really think those dog paws of yours are fit to touch even the corner of my hem? Get the hell out!"

Now that the young master had spoken, the attendants in Loyalty Hall, also long since fed-up with this façade, surged forth to clear out this pair of ordinary folk. They had no means by which to resist and were soundly kicked off the mountain.

Big Intestine-gongzi's furious screeching echoed in the distance. "Mo Ran, just you wait! I'm not done with you yet!"

Mo Ran stood outside Loyalty Hall and gazed at the night sky, his eyes curved in a smile as he sighed. "Wow, I'm so scared."

Xue Meng shot him a cold glare. "What're you so scared of?"

"They're salt merchants," Mo Ran said with genuine worry. "I'm afraid that in the future, I won't get to have any more salt, of course."

Xue Meng was silent for a moment. "You really didn't screw that prostitute?"

"Nope."

"And you really didn't steal from him?"

"Nope."

Xue Meng hmphed. "I don't believe you."

Mo Ran raised a hand, laughing. "Let the heavens strike me down with

lightning if I'm lying."

Xue Meng abruptly lifted his hand and grabbed Mo Ran's arm in a vice grip.

Mo Ran stared at him. "What are you doing?"

Xue Meng hmphed again and rapidly chanted an incantation. Scattered sounds were heard as a handful of beads, each about the size of a soybean, slipped out of Mo Ran's sleeve and fell to the ground. Xue Meng gathered spiritual energy in his hand and waved toward the beads, which glowed and grew in size until they turned into a pile of jewels and valuables. Plum-blossom bracelets and jade earrings lay golden and sparkling on the ground.

"We're fellow disciples of the same sect," said Mo Ran, after a pause. "Don't make things difficult."

Xue Meng glowered. "Mo Weiyu, have you no shame?"

"Heh heh."

"No one's laughing with you!" Xue Meng roared.

Mo Ran sighed. "It's not like I can cry on command."

Xue Meng's face was dark. "Is this how you use Sisheng Peak's concealing technique?"

"Mm-hmm. Practical application of knowledge and all that, y'know."

"That salt merchant was an annoying mutt, so I didn't call you out in front of him, but he did get something right," Xue Meng angrily continued. "To violate the rules against theft and lechery like you have is to ask for punishment, no matter which sect you're from!"

Mo Ran grinned, undaunted. "And what are you gonna do about it? Wait for Uncle to come back to tattle on me?"

He wasn't even worried. His uncle spoiled him to no end. At most he would scold Mo Ran a little; he'd never have the heart to beat him.

Xue Meng turned around, brushing his wind-blown hair aside, his eyes glinting with scorn in the dark of night. "Dad? No, he's at Kunlun and won't be back for a month or two."

Mo Ran's smile froze as an ominous feeling washed over him. He had suddenly remembered a certain person.

But—if he were here, then he would've been the one to receive Chang-gongzi at Loyalty Hall, not the oblivious Madam Wang. That person… couldn't be around…right?

The flickering emotion in Mo Ran's eyes intensified Xue Meng's air of disdain. "My father does spoil you too much. But isn't there a certain someone here at Sisheng Peak who doesn't coddle you?"

Mo Ran slowly backed away a few steps, a forced smile on his face. "My esteemed cousin, it's so late already. Let's not disturb our elder's peace and quiet. I was wrong, and there won't be a next time—how about that? Please go get some rest, heh heh. You look so tired."

And then he made a run for it.

You've got to be kidding me! This Xue Meng guy is far too ruthless!

At present, Mo Ran wasn't Taxian-jun, ruler of the mortal realm, so how could he risk falling into the hands of the individual in question? If that guy found out that he had stolen things *and* gone whoring, he'd probably break both of Mo Ran's legs! If he didn't run now, he wouldn't get another chance!

Chapter 6:
This Venerable One's Shizun

XUE MENG had grown up on Sisheng Peak, so he naturally knew all its ins, outs, and shortcuts. Ultimately, he managed to catch Mo Ran.

Xue Meng dragged the captured Mo Ran to the mountain's backwoods. The area behind Sisheng Peak was where the mortal realm came closest to the ghost realm. Between the two realms lay a barrier, and beyond that barrier lay the underworld.

When Mo Ran took in the appalling state of the area, he immediately understood why it had been Madam Wang in the main hall receiving visitors even when this other individual was present.

It wasn't that this person didn't want to help, it was that he really couldn't step away. The barrier to the ghost realm had ruptured.

At present, the entire backwoods was permeated with the essence of evil. Incorporeal ghosts swirled in the air, wailing in despair, their howling full of rancor. A breach had ripped open the sky, so immense it could be seen from as far away as the gate to the mountains. A long bluestone staircase, thousands of steps high, extended down from the fissure in the barrier, and beyond the fissure lay the ghost realm. Menacing ghosts who had cultivated a fleshly form crawled down these steps in great numbers as they crossed from the realm of the dead into the realm of the living.

If a normal person were to lay eyes upon this sight, they would no doubt be scared out of their mind. The first time Mo Ran had seen something like this, he, too, had been soaked with cold sweat. By now, he was used to it.

The barrier between the mortal and the ghost realms had first been built in an ancient era by Emperor Fuxi. Over the passage of time, it had become thin and weakened; it often cracked and broke in various places, requiring repair by cultivators. However, a task like this not only didn't do much to elevate one's cultivation, it was also incredibly taxing on one's spiritual power. To work so hard for no reward was an arduous chore, and so few cultivators in the cultivation world were willing to take on the burden.

When menacing spirits entered the world, the ones they attacked first were the common people of the lower cultivation realm. As the protectors of the lower cultivation realm, Sisheng Peak thus took on the job of repairing breaches. The mountains behind the sect's grounds faced the weakest point of the barrier; this was all for the sake of being able to make such repairs in time. Furthermore, this ragged barrier failed at least four or five times a year, like a pot that constantly needed to be patched.

A man stood atop the bluestone staircase at the entrance to the ghost realm. His snow-white robes fluttered, expansive sleeves flying in the wind, and the aura of his blade enveloped him in a shimmering golden light. He was single-handedly sweeping up those menacing spirits, clearing the evil ghosts away, and repairing the breach in the barrier with his power.

The man was slender in form and elegant in appearance, with a graceful, ethereal aura and a face that was both exceedingly handsome and beautiful. From afar, it was easy to imagine him as a dignified scholar standing beneath a blossoming tree, studying a scroll with a mystical and studious air. But a closer look revealed sharp, sword-like brows, phoenix eyes tilted upward at the corners, and a narrow, straight nose. Despite these refined and stately features, there was something harsh about his gaze that made him look particularly unapproachable.

Mo Ran watched him from a distance. Although he'd thought himself prepared, if he was honest with himself, seeing that figure appear once more before him, healthy and well, made him shudder down to the smallest fragments of his bones. Half dread, half…thrill.

His shizun.

Chu Wanning.

The person whom Xue Meng had cried and begged to see when he'd come to Wushan Palace in their previous life.

It had been this man who ruined Mo Ran's grandest plans. He'd sunk Mo Ran's lofty ambitions and Mo Ran had, in the end, imprisoned and tortured him to death.

Logically speaking, Mo Ran should have been glad to defeat this opponent and get the revenge he'd always wanted. Like a fish free to swim in the wide oceans or a bird free to fly in the boundless skies, Mo Ran had been

freed of anyone to keep him in check.

Originally, Mo Ran had thought he would think this way. But things had not panned out as such. When his shizun died, Mo Ran's hatred had been buried—along with something else that he couldn't quite put his finger on.

Mo Ran was no man of culture and didn't recognize this something else as the feeling of being evenly matched with a worthy opponent. He only knew that from then on, he had no true nemesis in the world.

With his shizun alive, Mo Ran had lived in fear, dread, and anxiety. The mere sight of the willow vine in his shizun's hand had made his entire body break out in goosebumps, just like how the mere sound of a wooden club knocking would make an oft-beaten dog shrink back, teeth aching and legs giving way, drool dripping from the corner of its lips. Even the muscles of his calves would spasm from nervousness.

With his shizun dead, the person Mo Ran most feared had lived no longer. Finally being able to commit the sin of murdering his mentor had made Mo Ran feel like he'd grown up. Matured.

After that, when his gaze swept over the mortal realm, there had been no one left who would dare force him to kneel, no one left who would dare slap him in the face.

To celebrate, he'd opened a pot of pear-blossom white wine and sat on the rooftop drinking for an entire night. That night, under the influence of alcohol, the scars on his back—left by his shizun's whip in his youth—had burned once more with fresh pain.

At this very moment, seeing his shizun standing again before him with his own eyes, Mo Ran couldn't help but stare. He felt both fear and resentment—but also the faintest trace of a twisted sort of ecstasy. He had regained such an opponent after having lost him. How could he not be delighted?

Chu Wanning was completely focused on fighting the scattered souls of the dead. He had no attention to spare for the two disciples who had intruded on the untamed stretch of the mountain.

He had an elegant face, with long and even brows, and beneath, that pair of phoenix eyes. His demeanor was graceful, dignified, and otherworldly; even in the face of demonic miasma and bloody rain, his cool

and distant expression remained unchanged. It wouldn't have looked strange or out of place if he were to sit down on the spot to light incense and play the qin.

However, this elegant, calm, and beautiful man was currently wielding a chilling exorcist's longsword that dripped with blood. With a single flick of his wide sleeve, the force of his blade sliced through the verdant stone steps to produce an explosion. Rubble and debris tumbled all the way down to the bottom of the mountain, and a rift of unfathomable depth split that staircase and its thousands of steps.

Such brutal ferocity.

How many years had it been since Mo Ran had last witnessed his shizun's strength?

Mo Ran's legs went weak—a conditioned response to that familiar, valiant, overbearing force. Unsteady, he dropped to his knees on the ground.

In no time at all, Chu Wanning annihilated the last of the ghosts and neatly patched the ruptured rift to the ghost realm. After completing his task, he gracefully descended from the sky to land before Mo Ran and Xue Meng.

He first glanced at Mo Ran, kneeling on the ground, before looking up to Xue Meng, the cast of his phoenix eyes somewhat icy. "Causing trouble again?"

Mo Ran had to concede. His shizun possessed the ability to assess a situation and immediately come to the most accurate conclusion.

"Shizun, Mo Ran went down the mountain and committed the crimes of theft and debauchery," said Xue Meng. "Please mete out his punishment."

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment, expression completely blank. Then he said coldly, "I see."

Mo Ran and Xue Meng were struck silent. They were both a little taken aback. And? Was that it?

Yet just as Mo Ran was starting to think he'd gotten off easy, he stole a glimpse at Chu Wanning and was caught entirely off guard. A flash of sharp golden light violently slashed through the air, and a crackle like lightning whipped directly across Mo Ran's cheek.

Splatters of blood blossomed everywhere.

The speed of that golden light was beyond shocking. Never mind dodging, Mo Ran hadn't even had the time to close his eyes before the flesh of his face was slashed open. The wound burned painfully.

Chu Wanning stood stonily in the howling winds, hands clasped behind his back. The night air was still filthy and thick with the stench of menacing spirits; with the addition of the scent of freshly spilt human blood, this restricted area at the back of the mountain was made even more horrifying and eerie.

The thing that had whipped Mo Ran was a willow vine, which had appeared from out of nowhere in Chu Wanning's hand. The vine hung all the way down to Chu Wanning's boots, and it was long and thin, with tender green leaves sprouting along its length.

The vine was undoubtedly an elegant object, one that called to mind verses of poetry like "Pliant is the willow branch I gift to my beloved."[7] Unfortunately, Chu Wanning was neither pliant nor in possession of a beloved.

The willow vine in his hand was in fact a holy weapon called Tianwen, and it sparked with bright gold and crimson light, illuminating the darkness all around as well as the bottomless depths of Chu Wanning's eyes, bringing them to life.

"Mo Weiyu, you certainly are brazen," Chu Wanning said, voice chilly. "Did you really think I wouldn't discipline you?"

If Mo Ran had been his original fifteen-year-old self, he might not have taken Chu Wanning's words seriously. He might even have thought that his shizun was only bluffing to scare him.

However, the Mo Weiyu who had been reborn had, in his previous life, long since paid the blood price to learn just what his shizun's discipline looked like. Instantly, the roots of his teeth ached and blood rushed to his head. His mouth was already running, feverishly denying everything in hopes of clearing his name.

"Shizun…" Cheek still bleeding, Mo Ran raised his eyes, letting them fill with a sheen of tears. He knew that his current disposition was both incredibly pathetic and incredibly pitiful. "This disciple has never stolen anything…has never committed debauchery… Why would Shizun hit me

purely on the basis of Xue Meng's word, without even having asked for my side of the story?"

Silence reigned.

Against his uncle, Mo Ran had two ultimate tricks. Number one: Act cute. Number two: Act pitiful. Now he turned both moves on Chu Wanning, looking so aggrieved that his tears threatened to spill over. "Is this disciple really so worthless in your eyes? How come Shizun won't even give me a chance to explain?"

Next to them, Xue Meng was so incensed that he stomped his foot. "Mo Ran! You—you dog leg! You—you're shameless! Shizun, don't listen to him! Don't let this bastard confuse you! He really is a thief! All the stolen property is still here!"

Chu Wanning lowered his gaze, his face cool and distant. "Mo Ran, did you really not steal anything?"

"I would never."

A pause. "You know the consequences of lying to me."

Mo Ran's entire body broke out in gooseflesh. How could he not know? Even so, he remained stubborn as a mule. "Shizun, please look into the facts first!"

Chu Wanning raised his hand. That scintillating vine swept forward again. This time, instead of whipping Mo Ran's face, it wrapped itself tightly around Mo Ran's body.

The sensation was one Mo Ran recognized all too well. Other than whipping people on the daily, the willow vine Tianwen had another use.

Chu Wanning stared at Mo Ran, bound in Tianwen's death grip, and asked once more, "You really didn't steal anything?"

Suddenly, all Mo Ran could feel was a familiar agony piercing straight into his heart, as if a sharp-fanged little snake had slithered its way into his chest and was wreaking havoc amidst his organs. Accompanying the stabbing pain was an irresistible temptation. Mo Ran's mouth opened in spite of himself, and he gasped, "I…have…never… *ah*…!"

Tianwen's golden light went berserk, as if it could sense his lies. But though the pain was so great that it drenched Mo Ran in cold sweat, he

resisted the torture with all he had.

This was Tianwen's second function outside of whipping: interrogation. Once bound by Tianwen, none could lie under its power. No matter whether they were human or ghost, alive or dead, Tianwen had the ability to force them to speak, thereby giving Chu Wanning the answers to his questions.

Only one person in their previous life had, through sheer strength of cultivation, ever managed to keep a secret from Tianwen. That person was none other than the one who had become the Emperor of the Mortal Realm: Mo Weiyu.

The freshly reborn Mo Ran had high hopes and thought that he might be able to fight Tianwen's brutal interrogation like he once had. But, after what felt like an eternity of biting down on his lips as enormous beads of sweat dripped down his ink-dark brows and full-body shivers racked his body, in the end, he was left prostrate from pain. He knelt at Chu Wanning's feet, gasping out heaving breaths.

"I… I…did steal something…"

The pain abruptly disappeared.

Mo Ran hadn't even caught his breath before Chu Wanning's next question came, his voice even colder than before. "Did you commit debauchery?"

Clever men didn't commit stupid deeds. If he had been unable to resist Tianwen earlier, it would be even more impossible to do so now. This time, Mo Ran didn't even bother to object; the moment the pain came, he cried out, "I did, I did, I did, I did! Shizun, please! No more."

To the side, Xue Meng's face was just about turning blue. "H-how could you?" he said, shocked. "That Rong Jiu is a man, and yet you…"

He went ignored as Tianwen's golden light slowly dimmed. Mo Ran gasped down great mouthfuls of air, and his entire body was soaked like he'd just been fished out of water. His face was white as a sheet, and his lips trembled uncontrollably as he lay on the ground, unable to move.

Through his sweat-damp lashes, he could see Chu Wanning's blurry yet elegant silhouette, with its green jade crown and broad sleeves that draped

to the ground. A wave of powerful hatred suddenly coursed through his heart.

Chu Wanning! This venerable one wasn't wrong to treat you the way he did in his previous life! Even after coming back to life, the mere sight of you is still aggravating! Fuck all eighteen generations of your ancestors!

Chu Wanning was unaware that his beast of a disciple was going to fuck all eighteen generations of his ancestors. He stood where he was for the moment, face dark, before saying, "Xue Meng."

Even though Xue Meng knew that the current trend among the young masters of wealthy houses was to play around with male prostitutes, and that the appeal lay in its novelty and not necessarily in an actual interest in men, he found all this rather hard to swallow. It took him a moment to reply. "Shizun, this disciple is present."

"Mo Ran has violated the three mandates against greed, promiscuity, and deception. Take him to Yanluo Hall for penance. At dawn tomorrow, bring him to the Platform of Sin and Virtue to be punished before all."

Xue Meng was shocked. "Wh-what? Before all?"

To be "punished before all" meant that a disciple who had committed grave sins would be dragged before the gathered disciples of the sect to be sentenced and punished in front of them. Even the grannies in the cafeteria would be brought out.

It would be utterly humiliating.

You must understand that Mo Ran was a young master of Sisheng Peak. Although the rules of the sect could have been said to be strict, Mo Ran had always been accorded special status. His uncle, feeling sorry for how Mo Ran had lost his parents at such a young age and had been stranded in the outside world for a whole fourteen years, always coddled him. Even if Mo Ran made mistakes, he only got a private lecture from his uncle, and the man had never once beaten him.

But Mo Ran's shizun wouldn't give face, even to the sect leader. He indeed intended to drag the man's precious nephew to the Platform of Sin and Virtue, where he would punish and shame Mo-gongzi before the entire sect. To Xue Meng, this was utterly shocking.

Mo Ran, on the other hand, wasn't surprised at all. He lay on the

ground, his lips curling into a sneer. Oh, how righteous his shizun was—so full of justice.

Chu Wanning was a cold-blooded person. In their previous life, Shi Mei had died before his very eyes. Mo Ran had cried and pleaded, tugged at the hem of his robes, knelt on the ground, and begged for his help. But Chu Wanning had turned a deaf ear on his pleas.

And so, Chu Wanning's own disciple had breathed his last at his feet, while beside him, Mo Ran cried his heart out. Even then, Chu Wanning had watched on without lifting a finger.

It wasn't remotely strange for him to drag Mo Ran to the Platform of Sin and Virtue and sentence him in public.

Mo Ran could only resent his current self's weak cultivation.
He resented that he couldn't peel off Chu Wanning's skin, pull out his nerves, and drink his blood. Resented that he couldn't yank Chu Wanning's hair back, couldn't violate and corrupt him to his heart's content, couldn't torment him and destroy his dignity, couldn't make him live a life worse than death…

Mo Ran only let the bestial savagery in his eyes slip for a moment, but Chu Wanning caught a glimpse of it. He glanced at Mo Ran's face, his own graceful, scholarly mien completely devoid of expression. "What are you thinking about?"

Shit! Tianwen hadn't yet been withdrawn!

Mo Ran once again felt the vine binding him squeeze and twist, making his organs feel like they were going to wrench into mush.
He screamed in agony, letting loose the thoughts in his mind.

"Chu Wanning! You think you're so tough?! *Watch me fuck you to death*!"

Silence fell.

Chu Wanning was speechless. Even Xue Meng was dumbfounded.

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Tianwen abruptly returned to Chu Wanning's palm, transforming into specks of golden light before eventually disappearing out of sight. Tianwen manifested from Chu Wanning's essence, and it could appear when summoned and disappear at will.

Xue Meng's face was pale as he stammered, "Sh-Sh-Shizun…"

Chu Wanning didn't speak. His long, inky, delicate lashes were lowered as he looked at his own palm for a long moment. Then he raised his eyes, face unmoved other than for how it had become slightly icier than before. For a long moment, he pinned Mo Ran with a glare that said, "This beastly disciple deserves death." Then he spoke, voice low: "Tianwen is broken. I'm going to fix it."

After dropping this statement, Chu Wanning turned and left.

Xue Meng wasn't a bright child. "H-how can a holy weapon like Tianwen be broken?"

Chu Wanning heard him. He turned and once again used that "this beastly disciple deserves death" gaze to glance at him. Xue Meng felt a chill run down his spine.

Mo Ran lay on the ground, half-dead, his expression lifeless.

Earlier, he really had been thinking about finding a chance to fuck Chu Wanning to death. He was well aware that this Chu-zongshi, with his titles like "Yuheng of the Night Sky" and "Beidou Immortal," was someone who paid exacting attention to refined, elegant manners and his own dignity. More than anything, he couldn't bear the thought of being quashed under someone's foot—of being sullied and abused.

How could he have let Chu Wanning hear something like that?!

Mo Ran howled pathetically like an abandoned dog, covering his face. As he recalled the look in Chu Wanning's eyes as he'd left, Mo Ran got the feeling that his own demise was probably imminent.

Chapter 7:
This Venerable One Likes Wontons

THE SUN BLAZED down from above. The vast grounds of Sisheng Peak stretched out for a hundred miles.

As a newcomer among the cultivation sects, Sisheng Peak differed from the famed sects of the upper cultivation realm.

Take, for example, the illustrious Linyi Rufeng Sect. Their main hall was named Six Virtues Hall, to encourage their disciples to adhere to the virtues of "wisdom, integrity, holiness, righteousness, benevolence, and loyalty." The residential dwelling where disciples stayed was called Six Conducts Gate, reminding their disciples of the importance of "filial piety to one's parents, camaraderie with one's peers, harmony with one's neighbors, respect for one's spouse, duty to society, and compassion for the masses." The study area was named Six Arts Platform, meaning that disciples were expected to be masters of "ritual, music, archery, riding, calligraphy, and arithmetic."

In short, endless elegance.

On the other hand, Sisheng Peak had come from humble origins, and its names were…hard to explain, to say the least. Loyalty Hall and the Platform of Sin and Virtue were acceptable. However, perhaps because Mo Ran's father and uncle weren't exactly scholars and had been unable to choke out that many decent names, after a few they'd given up and started goofing around, assigning "Xue Ya"-esque names left and right.

Thus, many names on Sisheng Peak had been plagiarized from the underworld. For example, the self-reflection room was called Yanluo Hall, the bridge connecting the recess and study areas was called Naihe Bridge,[8] the dining hall was called Mengpo Hall,[9] and the training field was called the Mountain of Daggers and Sea of Flames. Meanwhile, the forbidden area in the backwoods was called the Ghost Zone. So on and so forth.

At least these were relatively okay. The more out-of-the-way areas had particularly forthright names like This is a Mountain, This is Water, and This

is a Hole, as well as the famed Aaaaah and Waaaah Cliffs.

The elders' quarters naturally hadn't escaped unscathed, and each had their own nicknames. And, also naturally, Chu Wanning was no exception. He liked peace and quiet and didn't care to live near others. His residence was located at the southern summit of Sisheng Peak, hidden in a grove of cultivated bamboo that resembled an ocean of green jade. Before the main pavilion there lay a pond, which was covered in red lotuses that, thanks to an abundance of spiritual energy, bloomed as resplendently as crimson clouds throughout the seasons.

The disciples secretly called this elegant and scenic locale "Red Lotus Hell."

When Mo Ran thought about it, he couldn't help but snicker. Chu Wanning wore a frightful, sour face day in and day out. To the disciples, catching sight of him was like catching sight of a demon—and what should the home of demons be called if not hell?

"The hell are you giggling about?!" Xue Meng demanded, interrupting his daydream. "Hurry and finish your breakfast; I have to take you to the Platform of Sin and Virtue after this. Did you forget that Shizun is going to discipline you in front of everyone today?!"

Mo Ran sighed and gingerly touched the lash mark on his face. "Hsss… Ow."

"Serves you right!"

He sighed. "I wonder if Tianwen has been fixed yet. If not, please don't interrogate me with it again—who knows what other nonsense I might spout?"

Faced with Mo Ran's genuine concerns, Xue Meng's face flushed with anger. "If you dare to be i-improper toward Shizun in public, I'll rip your tongue out!" he threatened.

Mo Ran covered his face with one hand and waved the other. "No need, no need," he croaked faintly. "If Shizun ties me up with that willow vine again, I'll just end myself on the spot to prove my innocence."

Early in the morning, as the appointed time arrived, Mo Ran was brought out onto the Platform of Sin and Virtue in accordance with custom.

He cast his gaze out; below him, a sea of people dressed in dark blue stood as far as the eye could see. The disciples of Sisheng Peak all wore the sect uniform: light armor so blue as to be nearly black, a lion's head belt, wrist guards, and clothing trimmed in sparkling silver.

The sun rose from the east, illuminating an ocean of gleaming armor below the Platform of Sin and Virtue. Mo Ran knelt on the high platform, listening to the Jielü Elder read the lengthy indictment.

"The Yuheng Elder's disciple, Mo Weiyu, has disregarded our commandments, ignored our teachings, disrespected sect mandates, and abandoned morality, violating the fourth, ninth, and fifteenth rules. His punishment will be to receive eighty strikes, to copy the sect rules one hundred times, and to reflect in confinement for one month. Mo Weiyu, have you anything to say in your defense?"

Mo Ran glanced at the white silhouette in the distance. That elder was the only person in the entirety of Sisheng Peak who wasn't required to wear the standard silver-trimmed blue uniform.

Chu Wanning wore snow-white satin with an outer drape of cloud-patterned silver silk; it was as if he was swathed in clear frost from the highest of the heavens. But the person himself seemed more frigid than either white snow or clear frost. He sat placidly, too far away for Mo Ran to see his expression, but Mo Ran knew without needing to see that this person was probably entirely unperturbed.

Inhaling deeply, Mo Ran replied, "I have nothing to say in my defense."

Next, in accordance with custom, the Jielü Elder spoke to the disciples gathered below. "If anyone disagrees with this judgment or has any appeals to make, you may now speak."

The disciples fidgeted, glancing at one another. No one had ever thought that the Yuheng Elder, Chu Wanning, would actually send his own disciple to the Platform of Sin and Virtue to be punished in public. This… Put politely, this was called being strict and impartial. Put frankly, it was called being a cold-blooded demon.

Cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning wore an air of indifference, sitting in his seat with his chin propped up in one hand.

Suddenly someone shouted using an amplification technique, “Yuheng Elder, this disciple would like to plead for leniency on behalf of Mo-shidi.”

“Is that so?”

The disciple clearly thought that, even if Mo Ran had made a blunder, since he was the sect leader’s nephew, his prospects were still bright and promising. Thus he decided to seize the opportunity to curry favor with Mo Ran and started to spout nonsense. “Although Mo-shidi has erred, he is cordial with his fellow disciples and shows compassion to the small and weak in his everyday conduct. Will the Yuheng Elder please grant leniency in view of his kind nature?”

This fellow wasn’t the only one hoping to curry favor with Mo-shidi. More and more people began to speak on Mo Ran’s behalf, on grounds fantastic and varied. Even Mo Ran grew embarrassed listening to them. When had he ever been “pure and innocent, broad-minded and open”? Was this assembly for punishment or commendation?

“Yuheng Elder, Mo-shidi once helped me defeat demons and slay vicious beasts. I would like to request recognition for Mo-shidi’s merits—for his merits to undo his demerits—and request that the elder lessen his punishment!”

“Yuheng Elder, when I experienced qi deviation, it was Mo-shidi who helped me dispel my inner demons. I believe Mo-shidi only erred due to a brief lapse in judgment, and I request that the elder lighten Shidi’s punishment!”

“Yuheng Elder, Mo-shidi once bestowed upon me an elixir to save my mother; he is virtuous and benevolent by nature. Elder—please be lenient!”

The final person’s pretext had been taken by the person before him, and he was left at a loss for words. Chu Wanning’s frosty gaze swept toward him, and he rambled out in a panic, “Yuheng Elder, Mo-shidi once helped me dual cultivate—”

“Pfft.” Someone failed to hold in their laughter.

The last disciple blushed up to his ears and withdrew in embarrassment.

“Yuheng, calm down, calm down…” said the Jielü Elder, who, seeing

this turn of events, hurriedly tried to soothe him.

"I have never seen a person this shameless," Chu Wanning said starkly. "What is his name? Whose disciple is this?"

The Jielü Elder hesitated slightly, then forced himself to quietly respond. "My disciple, Yao Lian."

Chu Wanning raised his eyebrows. "Your disciple? 'Save face'?"[10]

This was acutely awkward for the Jielü Elder, whose old face turned bright red as he tried to change the topic. "He's got a decent singing voice. Good to keep around when receiving offerings."

Chu Wanning hmphed and turned away, not wanting to waste any more breath on the shameless Jielü Elder. There were thousands of people in Sisheng Peak. A couple of sycophants here and there was nothing out of the ordinary.

As Mo Ran took in the persistent conviction of his sect brothers, even he almost began to believe them. Impressive, truly impressive. As it turned out, he wasn't the only one in this sect adept at spewing lies in broad daylight. This place was brimming with talented people.

After countless pleas of "Yuheng Elder, please be merciful," Chu Wanning finally spoke. "You plead on behalf of Mo Weiyu?" He paused before continuing. "Very well. Come here."

Unsure of what to expect, the supplicants went up to him with fear and trepidation.

A golden light flashed in Chu Wanning's hand and Tianwen appeared as commanded. With a *whoosh*, it wrapped the dozen-some disciples in a bundle and bound them firmly in place.

Not this again! Mo Ran was about to lose all hope. The mere sight of Tianwen made his legs go weak. Where the hell had Chu Wanning even obtained that freakish weapon?! It was a good thing Chu Wanning had never taken a wife in their previous lifetime. Pity the woman stuck with him; if she didn't get whipped to death, she'd probably be interrogated to the same end.

Chu Wanning's gaze was full of scorn as he singled out one disciple in the group. "Mo Ran helped you defeat demons?"

The disciple had no chance against Tianwen's torment and instantly

howled, “No! *No!*”

He moved on to the next. “Mo Ran helped you break out of a qi deviation?”

“Aaah! Never! Never!”

“Mo Ran gave you an elixir?”

“Aaah! Help! No, no, no! I made it up! I made it up!”

Chu Wanning loosened the binding, but immediately after, he raised his hand in a ruthless brandish. Sparks flew as Tianwen lashed out to land brutally against the backs of those lying disciples.

Shrieks instantly rang out, and blood splattered everywhere.

Chu Wanning’s brow drew down in a frown as he berated them. “What are you yelling for? Kneel! Discipline attendant!”

“Present.”

“Deliver the punishment!”

“Understood!”

Ultimately, not only did these people not manage to gain favor, they also earned ten strikes each for violating the mandate against deception—plus a free bonus lash from the Yuheng Elder.

Nightfall found Mo Ran sprawled out on his bed. Even though medicinal ointment has been applied to his back, it was still covered in crisscrossing lashes, and it was impossible to even turn over. He let out a few sniffles, eyes watering from the pain.

With his cute looks, this whimpering made him seem like a fluffy kitten that had been woefully beaten. Unfortunately, his inner thoughts were nothing like those of a kitten. He gripped the blanket and bit into the bedsheets, imagining that bastard Chu Wanning in their place. He bit! Stomped! Kicked! Ripped!

His only comfort was that Shi Mei had come to visit him with a bowl of handmade wontons. Under Shi Mei’s gentle, compassionate gaze, Mo Ran’s tears fell even more fiercely. He didn’t care for sayings like “men don’t cry.” He loved to act cute and spoiled in front of the person he liked.

“Does it hurt too much? Are you able to sit up?” Shi Mei sat at the edge of his bed and let out a sigh. “Shizun, he… His hand was far too heavy. Look at your wounds… Some of them are even still bleeding.”

Warmth rose in Mo Ran’s chest as he listened to these sympathetic words. He looked up with teary eyes and batted his lashes. “Knowing Shi Mei cares for me so much, I—I don’t feel the pain anymore.”

“Oh, look at the state of you. How can it not hurt? You should be more than familiar with Shizun’s temperament. No more mistakes like that in the future, okay?” Shi Mei looked at him with equal parts helplessness and sympathy, his expressive eyes gleaming in the candlelight like warm spring waters.

Mo Ran’s heart skipped a beat. “It won’t happen again,” he answered obediently. “I swear.”

“Who can even take your vows seriously anymore?” Shi Mei scolded, but he was smiling. “The wontons are getting cold. Can you get up? Just stay put if not; I’ll feed you.”

Mo Ran was already halfway up, but at these words, he instantly collapsed back down.

Shi Mei gave him a look.

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In both this lifetime and the last, Shi Mei's wontons were Mo Ran's favorite dish. With wrappers thin as clouds and fillings tender as cream, every bite of the satisfyingly plump, soft, and savory dumplings practically melted in his mouth, leaving behind a delectable aftertaste.

Most of all, he loved the soup, simmered to a rich milky consistency, sprinkled with bits of chopped green scallion and tender wisps of yellow eggs, and finally a spoonful of chili-oil pepper stir-fried in garlic paste, which warmed you from the inside out as you ate it.

Shi Mei fed him attentively, spoonful by spoonful. "I didn't add any chili oil today. Your injuries are too severe, and spicy food isn't good when you're recovering. Settle for the broth, okay?"

Mo Ran gazed at him, smiling, unable and unwilling to look away. "Everything you make is delicious, spicy or not."

"Flatterer." Shi Mei smiled back and picked out the poached egg in the soup. "Here's a runny egg as a reward; I know you like those."

Mo Ran laughed mischievously, a silly tuft of hair curling up from his head like a blooming flower. "Shi Mei."

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Just felt like saying your name."

Shi Mei was quiet.

The hair tuft swayed back and forth. "Shi Mei."

Shi Mei suppressed a laugh. "Just saying it again?"

"Mm-hmm. Saying your name makes me happy."

Shi Mei hesitated for a moment, then tenderly felt his forehead. "Silly child. Do you have a fever?"

Mo Ran chuckled and rolled over halfway to peek at him sideways, eyes brightly shining like they were full of stars. "I wish I could eat Shi Mei's wontons every day."

He meant every word. After Shi Mei's death, Mo Ran had longed to taste his handmade wontons again, but that flavor had disappeared forever.

At that time, Chu Wanning hadn't yet completely broken off relations

with him. Perhaps due to a guilty conscience, after seeing the way Mo Ran remained kneeling in front of Shi Mei's coffin in a stupor, Chu Wanning had quietly gone to the kitchen. There, he'd kneaded dough, chopped up the filling, and carefully folded a few wontons. However, Mo Ran had caught him before he could finish. Mo Ran, who had just lost his true love, had been unable to tolerate this. Chu Wanning's actions had seemed to him like a mockery, a clumsy imitation, a deliberate stab.

Shi Mei was dead. Chu Wanning could have saved him, but he had refused to help. Now he dared to try to make Mo Ran wontons in place of Shi Mei. Had he thought that would make Mo Ran happy?

Mo Ran had rushed into the kitchen and knocked everything over. Plump white wontons had rolled all across the floor.

He'd roared at Chu Wanning, "Who the fuck do you think you are?! Do you have any right to use the things he used? To make the food he made? Shi Mei is *dead*—are you happy now? Or do you have to hound all your disciples to death or madness before you're satisfied? Chu Wanning! There's no one left in this world who could make those wontons ever again. No matter how much you imitate him, you'll never even come close!"

Eating this bowl of wontons now, Mo Ran was both overjoyed and greatly moved. He kept smiling as he ate, but his eyes grew slightly damp. Thankfully, the candlelight was dim, and Shi Mei couldn't clearly see the minute details of his expression.

"Shi Mei," said Mo Ran.

"Mm?"

"Thank you."

Shi Mei paused for a second, then smiled kindly. "Isn't it just a bowl of wontons? There's no need to be so formal. If you like them, I'll make them for you more often."

Mo Ran wanted to say, *The thanks isn't just for the wontons. Thank you also, in both this lifetime and the last, for being the only person to never look down on me, who didn't pay any mind to my origins, who didn't care about the fourteen years I spent struggling to survive by any means, fair or foul.*

Thank you also, because if not for the fact that I remembered you at that moment when I was first reborn, I probably would have killed Rong Jiu, repeated a grave mistake, and walked the same bitter path as before.

Thankfully, I was reborn before your death. I will definitely protect you this time. If anything happens to you, even if that cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning won't save you, I will.

But there was no way he could say any of this.

In the end, Mo Ran finished the soup without saying anything. He left not even a sliver of chopped scallions. He licked his lips as if he wanted more, his dimples distinct and charming, looking cute as a fuzzy kitten. "Can I have more tomorrow?"

Shi Mei didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Don't you want to try something else? Won't you get tired of them?"

"I'll never get tired of your wontons, as long as you don't get tired of me!"

Shi Mei laughed, shaking his head. "I'm not sure how much flour is left. If there isn't enough flour for wontons, how about eggs in sweet soup instead? I remember you liked that one too."

"Okey dokey! As long as you make it, anything is fine." Mo Ran was elated, so happy he could have rolled around hugging his quilt. *Look how tender and caring Shi Mei is. Chu Wanning, go ahead and whip me if you like! I've got a beauty to take care of me when I'm laid out in bed, heh heh heh!*

Just thinking about that shizun of his lit a flame of anger in the midst of his tender sentiments. Mo Ran dug resentfully into the crack between the bed and the headboard once again, cursing internally.

"Yuheng of the Night Sky"? "Beidou Immortal"? What bullshit! Chu Wanning, in this lifetime, just you wait and see!

Chapter 8:
This Venerable One Gets Punished

MO RAN SPENT three whole days lying on his bed like a dead fish. His wounds had only just closed when he received a summons telling him to get the hell over to the Red Lotus Pavilion to do manual labor.

This was part of the punishment as well. Mo Ran couldn't go down the mountain during his period of confinement, but neither was he permitted to just sit around. And so, he would help out by doing odd jobs around the sect. These odd jobs were generally things like helping the cafeteria lady at Mengpo Hall wash dishes, giving the three hundred and sixty-five stone lions on the pillars of Naihe Bridge a good scrub, transcribing copies of tedious files and dull scriptures, so on and so forth.

But just what kind of place was the Red Lotus Pavilion? It was the residence of that bastard, Chu Wanning, the accursed den that everyone called Red Lotus Hell. Only a handful of people of Sisheng Peak had ever set foot within it. Of the ones who had, every single one had come back with either their arms or legs broken. Thus, in addition to Red Lotus Hell, Chu Wanning's residence had another nickname that was even more unpretentious: the Pavilion of Broken Legs.

The sect disciples had an inside joke: "The pavilion hides a beauty; the beauty holds Tianwen. Enter through the Gate of Broken Legs and know the agony of getting your legs broken. If you want your meridians busted, look no further than the Yuheng Elder."

Once, a fearless female disciple who was outrageously lecherous had actually dared to thirst after the Yuheng Elder's beauty. She had snuck to the southern peak on a moonless night to climb onto the roof, hoping to peek at the elder as he bathed.

The outcome was a foregone conclusion. That female warrior had been escorted by Tianwen to the very border of life and death, and had been bedridden for no less than one hundred miserable days. Furthermore, Chu Wanning had declared that any further transgressions would be met directly with an eye-gouging.

You see? What blunt boorishness! What insensitive behavior! What a loathsome man!

Within the sect, there had been a number of naïve and foolish young girls who—thinking that as girls, the Yuheng Elder would pity them and show them compassion—would giggle and tease him, boldly hoping to arouse his attention. However, once the elder butchered that female delinquent, no one had dared attempt to hit on him again.

The Yuheng Elder was indiscriminate when it came to lashes, having not a scrap of a proper gentleman's disposition. Other than his pretty face, he had nothing to recommend him—or such was the opinion of the sect's disciples.

The little messenger shidi looked at Mo Ran with sympathy in his eyes. He tried to hold back, but in the end, he couldn't. "Mo-Shixiong…"

"Hm?"

"The Yuheng Elder's temper is so bad that no one who enters the Red Lotus Pavilion comes out standing. Why don't you see if you could say your wounds haven't healed and beg the Yuheng Elder to let you wash dishes instead?"

Mo Ran was eminently grateful for this shidi's Buddha-like compassion, but he still rejected the idea. Beg Chu Wanning? Please. He didn't want to go another round with Tianwen.

Thus, with immense effort, he dressed himself and dragged his heavy feet toward the southern summit of Sisheng Peak, reluctance weighing down his every step.

Red Lotus Pavilion, Red Lotus Hell. There was not a single soul in sight for a hundred miles around Chu Wanning's residence. No one wanted to stray close to where he lived; Chu Wanning's terrible taste and unpredictable temper made everyone in the sect stay far away, only ever watching him from a respectful distance.

Mo Ran remained somewhat nervous; he didn't know what Chu Wanning would make him do as punishment. His thoughts ran wild for the entirety of his journey to the peak of the southern summit. After he crossed through a dense field of bamboo groves, a large expanse of vividly crimson red lotuses came into view.

It was yet fairly early in the morning. The sun had only just risen in the east, and it shone with a dazzling gleam on the horizon. From the heavenly lotus pads in the pond grew stalks that connected the crimson blossoms with the fiery red skies; flower and sky each absorbed and reflected the other to amplify their radiance, until they were legitimately impressive to behold. Upon the pond, a winding zig-zag bridge led to a pavilion that stood in quiet elegance. Behind it lay a mountainous backdrop that streamed with curtains of waterfalls. Beads of water tinkled onto the rocks below like shards of crystal, shattering into a watery mist that rose like steam. Light shimmered through the haze, casting an ethereal ambiance amidst the calm.

Mo Ran's feeling about all this was: *Ugh*.

No matter how beautiful it was, anywhere Chu Wanning lived could only be *ugh* to him!

Look at this excessive lavishness—how wastefully bountiful! The dormitory where the disciples slept was tightly cramped, each room given sparingly little space. Yet look at the Yuheng Elder! He was just one person, but he'd taken over an entire mountaintop and had even dug three giant ponds to plant an abundance of lotus flowers. All right, okay, so these lotus flowers were said to be of unique strains and could be made into medicines of rare quality, but—

Either way, it was an eyesore. It really was too bad that Mo Ran couldn't just set fire to this pavilion and burn it down.

Nevertheless, grousing was nothing more than grousing. Since he was only sixteen and powerless to compete with his shizun, Mo Ran approached Chu Wanning's residence to stand at the front entrance. He curved his eyes into a smile and called out with a disgustingly sweet voice, pretending to be a lowly plebe. "This disciple Mo Ran greets Shizun."

"Mn. Come in."

The interior of the room was a huge mess. That cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning was dressed all in white, the lapels of his robes crisscrossed high and tight to lend him a chaste, ascetic air. Today his hair was up in a high ponytail, and he was seated on the ground surrounded by mechanical parts, a pair of black metal gauntlets on his hands and a brush bitten between his teeth.

He sent Mo Ran an expressionless glance and said around the brush in his mouth, “Come here.”

Mo Ran went over. It was actually a little difficult because there wasn’t any space left in the house for a person to walk; blueprints, pieces of lumber, and metal parts were scattered all over the place.

Mo Ran’s brows twitched. In his previous life, he had never entered Chu Wanning’s rooms. Who could’ve imagined that a poised, handsome man like him would live in such a mess? It was an honestly indescribable feeling.

“Shizun, what are you making?”

“The Holy Night Guardian.”

“Huh?”

Chu Wanning was a little grumpy, probably because there was a brush in his mouth that made it inconvenient to talk. “The Holy Night Guardian.”

Mo Ran glanced mutely at the parts strewn about the floor.

This shizun of his also had the title Chu-zongshi, which wasn’t just an empty appellation. Mo Ran had to admit that, to be fair, Chu Wanning was a remarkable man. Whether it was by the merit of his three holy weapons, his barrier-repairing powers, or his mechanical engineering skills, he had earned the right to be called the “best of the best.” This was also why, despite his bad temper and how difficult it was to please him, every major cultivation sect had fought to win him over.

As for the Holy Night Guardian, this was something with which the reborn Mo Ran was more than familiar. It was an automaton of Chu Wanning’s invention, cheap in price but tremendously strong and effective in battle. It could protect the common folk in the lower cultivation realm from demonic incursions at night.

In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, the completed Holy Night Guardian had been something that nearly every household owned. Each set of armor was priced around the same as a broom and was more effective than pictures of door guardians and their open, teeth-bared mouths. Even after Chu Wanning’s death, those Holy Night Guardians had continued to protect impoverished families who couldn’t afford the services of a cultivator.

Such heartfelt compassion, when compared to the indifference with

which he treated his disciples… Heh, it filled Mo Ran with contempt.

Mo Ran sat down and looked at the Holy Night Guardian that was currently nothing more than mere parts as events of the past drifted through his mind. Unable to resist, he reached out to pick up one of the guardian's finger joints to examine it.

Chu Wanning clicked together the mortise and tenon of the parts in his hands and finally freed himself to take away the brush that had been between his lips. He glared at Mo Ran. "That one was just oiled. No touching."

"Oh…" Mo Ran put down the finger joint and schooled his thoughts. Still playing the role of someone cute and harmless, he asked with a smile, "Did Shizun summon me here to help?"

"Mn," said Chu Wanning.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Clean the house."

Mo Ran's smile froze. He glanced around him at the room, which looked like it had just survived an earthquake.

For all that Chu Wanning was a genius when it came to cultivation techniques, he truly was an idiot when it came to everyday life.

After cleaning up the fifth teacup that had been shattered but hadn't been swept away, Mo Ran finally couldn't take it anymore. "Shizun, how long has it been since you last cleaned? Sheesh, it's so messy!"

Chu Wanning was currently looking at a blueprint and didn't look up even when he heard the question. "Around a year."

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Mo Ran balked. “And where do you usually sleep?”

“What?” That blueprint probably had some problems with it, making Chu Wanning more prickly than usual at being interrupted. He ran a hand through his hair and answered irritably, “On the bed, of course.”

Mo Ran took a look at the bed, which was piled high with various gadgets and gimmicks that were nearly finished. It was also laden with saws, axes, sickles, and other such tools, each eminently sharp and glinting with a steely light.

Unbelievable. How did this person sleep without chopping his own head off?

After laboring for over half a day, Mo Ran had swept up enough sawdust and dirt from the floor to fill three dustpans. After wiping down the shelves, more than ten white rags were now black. By the time noon came around, only half the place had been organized.

Fucking Chu Wanning. He really was more vile than a shrew.

Cleaning a room was not, at first glance, a particularly severe punishment. Said out loud, it didn’t seem particularly laborious either. However, who could have known this meant sweeping a hellish place that hadn’t been cleaned for three hundred and sixty-five days? Never mind that Mo Ran was covered in lash marks, even if he were in perfect health, a tiresome torture like this could still kill him half-dead!

“Shizun…”

“Hm?”

“This pile of clothes…” Had probably been sitting there for three months.

Chu Wanning finally finished connecting an arm of the Holy Night Guardian. He rubbed his sore shoulders and looked up to glance at the laundry basket, currently piled high as a mountain with robes. “I’ll wash them myself,” he said coolly.

Mo Ran let out a sigh of relief. Thank the heavens. Then afterward, a little curious, he asked, “Eh? Shizun knows how to do laundry?”

Chu Wanning glanced at him. After a moment, he replied stiffly, “How

hard can it be? Throw it in water, let it soak a bit, then fish it up to lay dry. Done."

Really. What would the ladies who secretly admired and crushed on Chu-zongshi think if they knew about this? Mo Ran wholeheartedly believed that this repulsive and disgusting man was only good for his looks and nothing else. If this came out, how many tender hearts would be broken?

"It's getting late. Follow me to the cafeteria and do the rest when we come back."

Mengpo Hall was bustling with activity as Sisheng Peak disciples gathered to eat in small groups. Chu Wanning placed a few dishes on his wooden tray and went to sit quietly in a corner.

Gradually, the seats in the twenty-foot radius surrounding him emptied. No one dared to sit near the Yuheng Elder, on the off chance that something might upset him and Tianwen would come out for a whipping. Chu Wanning was aware of this but didn't mind in the least. He sat by himself like a cold beauty, partaking of his meal in a refined manner.

But it was a little different today. Mo Ran had come with him and, naturally, had to sit with him too.

Everyone was afraid of Chu Wanning, and Mo Ran was no exception. But having already died once, he wasn't *too* frightened of Chu Wanning—especially since the dread from their first meeting had faded away and the loathing he'd felt toward his shizun in his last life had begun to slowly resurface. So what if Chu Wanning was ferocious? He'd also died once before, and by Mo Ran's own hands.

Mo Ran sat down facing him, leisurely chewing his sweet and sour ribs. He ate, crunching away, and a small hill of bones soon materialized by his bowl.

Chu Wanning slammed down his chopsticks.

Mo Ran blinked.

"Can you not smack your lips when you eat?"

"I'm chewing on ribs. How do I chew without smacking my lips?"

"Then don't eat ribs."

“But I like ribs.”

“Then get lost and go eat elsewhere.”

As they argued, their voices rose higher and higher; some disciples started to steal glances at them.

Mo Ran suppressed the urge to flip the bowl of food onto Chu Wanning’s head. His lips, gleaming with oil, pursed into a line. After a while, he squinted, the corner of his mouth curving into a sweet smile. “Don’t yell so loudly, Shizun. If others hear, won’t they make fun of us?”

Chu Wanning had always had a thin face, and sure enough, he lowered his voice to mutter, “Scram.”

Mo Ran laughed so hard he almost fell over.

Silence.

“Ah, don’t glare at me, Shizun. Please eat, eat. I’ll try to chew quietly.” Having had his fun, Mo Ran went back to his good and obedient act, and indeed he ate his ribs much less noisily.

Chu Wanning was amenable to coaxing but not coercion; when Mo Ran did as he was told, his shizun’s expression relaxed a bit and he no longer looked so bitter and resentful. He lowered his head and continued elegantly eating his meal of vegetables and tofu.

This peace didn’t last long before Mo Ran started acting up again. He didn’t know why he was doing what he was doing either; what he did know was that every time he saw Chu Wanning in this lifetime, he just wanted to piss him off, one way or another.

Thus, Chu Wanning noticed that, although Mo Ran was no longer chewing loudly, he was eating with his hands, his fingers covered in grease, the sauce shiny and dripping. The veins at Chu Wanning’s temples bulged angrily as he tried to bear with it. He lowered his gaze, not looking at Mo Ran, and focused on eating his own food.

Maybe it was because Mo Ran was enjoying the food so much that he got carried away, but after he was done chewing a particular bone, he carelessly tossed it into Chu Wanning’s bowl. Chu Wanning glared at the messily gnawed rib, the air around him freezing visibly with frightening speed.

"Mo Ran…!"

"Shizun…" Mo Ran was slightly terrified, but even he couldn't tell how much of his act was fake and how much was real. "That…uh, I didn't mean to do that."

Yeah, right.

Silence.

"Don't be mad—I'll pick it out right away." As he said so, Mo Ran indeed extended his chopsticks and speedily stuck them into Chu Wanning's bowl to retrieve the offending rib bone.

Chu Wanning's face went blue, and he looked like he was about to faint from disgust.

Mo Ran's eyelashes shivered, his delicate features looking somewhat pitiful as if he'd been wronged. "Does Shizun find me that repulsive?"

Silence.

"Shizun, I'm really sorry."

Forget it, Chu Wanning thought to himself. There was no need to argue with those who were younger than him. He abandoned the urge to call forth Tianwen and give Mo Ran a beating, but his appetite had been wiped out. He stood. "I'm full."

"Eh? That's all you're going to eat? Shizun, you've barely touched your food."

"I wasn't hungry," Chu Wanning said dourly.

Mo Ran was internally delighted, but his mouth kept speaking sweet words. "Then I'm not eating any more either. Let us go back to the Red Lotus He—ahem, the Red Lotus Pavilion."

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed. "Us?" His gaze was disdainful. "There is no 'us.' Elders and juniors have a hierarchy and distinction; watch your language."

Mo Ran responded agreeably on the outside, his eyes curved in a smile, clever, obedient, and adorable. But on the inside, he thought, *Elders and juniors? Watch my language?*

Heh, if Chu Wanning only knew what had happened in their previous

lifetime, then he would realize that in the end, in this world, only he, Mo Weiyu, was the superior between them. No matter how noble and arrogant Chu Wanning was, how unparalleled, he had ultimately been reduced to a mere speck of mud on the sole of Mo Ran's boots, living on without purpose only by Mo Ran's grace.

Mo Ran walked faster to match his shizun's pace, still smiling brightly.

If Shi Mei was the pure white moonlight of his heart, then Chu Wanning was the piece of fish bone stuck in his throat. He would pull it out and crush it, or swallow it and let it be dissolved by his stomach acid. In this reborn life, he could forgive anyone.

But he would absolutely never forgive Chu Wanning.

However, it seemed that Chu Wanning had no intentions of letting him off easy either. Mo Ran stood before the library of Red Lotus Hell, staring at the fifty bookshelves, each ten shelves high, and thought that he had surely misheard.

"Shizun, what…did you say?"

Chu Wanning answered indifferently, "Wipe every book in here."

Mo Ran had no words.

"Once you're done, catalogue them."

Still no words.

"I will be checking them in the morning."

Mo Ran stared.

What the hell! Was he going to be stuck in Red Lotus Hell overnight?! But he'd made plans to meet Shi Mei to get him to change his bandages!

Mo Ran opened his mouth to bargain, but Chu Wanning paid him no heed and turned around with a sweep of his sleeves to leave for the machinery workshop. He even closed the door behind him with elegant indifference.

Date night summarily dashed, Mo Ran sunk deeply into his feelings of disdain for Chu Wanning. He wanted to burn all of Chu Wanning's books.

Wait! The gears in his head turned as he came up with an even more ruinous idea…

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Chapter 9:
This Venerable One Is Not an Actor

CHU WANNING'S TASTES WERE, in short, terrible. Dry, tedious, utterly despair-inducing. For example: all the crappy books he'd stuffed on this shelf!

A Catalog of Ancient Barriers, *An Illustrated Archive of Unusual Flora*, *Zither Arrangements of Linyi Rufeng Sect*, *Plant Collections*. There were only a few books that counted as acceptable reading material, like *A Regional Travel Guide to Sichuan* and *Sichuan Recipes*.

Mo Ran picked a few of the newer-looking books, ones that Chu Wanning likely wouldn't read often, and doodled a bunch of porn on the pages.

Heh, there are at least eight thousand, if not ten thousand books here, he thought to himself as he drew. *Who knows how long it'll take Chu Wanning to discover that a few have been modified into forbidden literature?*

By then there would be no way to tell who had done it, and Chu Wanning would be left seething. Mo Ran really was so unbelievably clever.

As he thought about this, Mo Ran couldn't help but snicker, and he hugged the books in glee.

Mo Ran vandalized more than a dozen books without stopping, letting his imagination run wild and unrestrained. All kinds of erotic scenes manifested under his hand. His brushstrokes were alluring and elegant, the fabrics now clinging to the figures as if just rising out of water, then sweeping as if wind-blown. It was all too easy to imagine what rumors would spread if someone were to borrow a book from the Yuheng Elder and just so happened to pick one of these.

"The Yuheng Elder is truly a two-faced beast, to insert erotic illustrations of men and women between the pages of *The Art of Meditation*!"

"The Yuheng Elder is a fraudulent master who hides comics of homosexual obscenity in his sword technique manuals!"

"'Beidou Immortal,' my ass! He's literally a beast in human clothing!"

The more Mo Ran thought about it, the funnier it became. At length he was rolling on the floor with laughter, holding his stomach and kicking his legs in delight. He was so absorbed that he didn't even notice when someone appeared at the library doors.

And so, the sight that greeted Shi Mei as he approached was that of Mo Ran rolling in a pile of books, laughing as if he had gone mad.

"A-Ran, what are you doing?"

Startled, Mo Ran sat up in a hurry, frantically covering all the lewd drawings and putting on a more presentable face. "W-wiping the floor."

Shi Mei held back a laugh. "With your clothes?"

"Ahem, I couldn't find a cleaning rag. Anyway, moving on—what are you doing here so late, Shi Mei?"

"I couldn't find you in your room, so I asked around and was told that you were at Shizun's place." Shi Mei stepped inside the library and helped Mo Ran clean up the books scattered across the floor, a gentle smile on his lips. "There wasn't anything else that needed doing, so I came to see you."

Mo Ran was both overjoyed and overwhelmed. He pursed his lips; for some reason, his usual smooth charm was nowhere to be found, and he couldn't actually think of what to say at that moment.

"Then…um…then please have a seat!" Mo Ran spun excitedly in place, then said, a little nervously, "I-I'll go get some tea for you!"

"No need, I snuck in here. There'll be trouble if Shizun finds out."

"I guess…" Mo Ran scratched his head. *Chu Wanning, that freak! I'll topple him sooner or later and get Shi Mei out from under his thumb!*

"You probably haven't eaten yet, right? I brought you dinner."

Mo Ran's eyes lit up. "Wontons?"

"Pfft, you're really not tired of them, huh? The Red Lotus Pavilion is a bit far away, and I was afraid the wontons would be stuck together by the time I got here, so I didn't bring any. Here, see if this stir-fry is to your taste."

Shi Mei opened the container he'd brought, revealing the red-colored dishes inside. Plates of shunfeng pig ear salad, savory shredded yuxiang pork,

diced kungpao chicken, smashed cucumber salad, and a bowl of rice.

"Ah, you added peppers this time?"

"Only a little, so you don't go into withdrawal," Shi Mei said, smiling. They both loved spicy foods, so of course he understood the concept of "no spice, no joy." "But your wounds haven't fully healed, so I only put in a little bit, just to add some flavor. It's better than not having even a hint of red."

Mo Ran chewed on his chopsticks happily, his dimples sweet as honey in the candlelight. "Ah! I'm going to cry with gratitude!"

Shi Mei suppressed a laugh. "The food will be cold by the time you're done sniffling. You can cry after you've eaten."

Mo Ran cheered and dug in, chopsticks flying with impressive speed. He always ate like a starving dog; Chu Wanning hated the unseemly way he went at it, but Shi Mei wouldn't mind. Shi Mei was always so caring, laughing and telling him to eat slower while offering him a cup of tea.

Before long, the plates were empty. Mo Ran patted his full belly with a contented sigh, eyes happily closed. "That hit the spot…"

"Which tastes better, the wontons or these dishes?" Shi Mei asked, voice casual.

When it came to food, Mo Ran was dedicated in the same way he was to his first love. He tilted his head, clear black eyes soft and fixed on Shi Mei as he grinned. "Wontons."

Shimei said nothing and shook his head, smiling. After a moment, he continued, "A-Ran, let me help you change your bandages and reapply the medicine."

The medicinal salve had been made by Madam Wang. She had once been a disciple of the medical sect Guyueye; while her martial aptitude was low and she disliked fighting, she was fond of the medicinal arts. Sisheng Peak had an herbal medicine garden, and she had personally planted many precious herbs there, so the sect's supply of remedies never ran low.

Mo Ran took off his top and sat, facing away from Shi Mei. The scars on his back still faintly hurt, but as Shi Mei's warm fingers carefully spread and rubbed in the ointment, he gradually forgot the pain, and instead his thoughts began to stray in a frisky direction.

“All done.” Shi Mei wrapped new bandages around Mo Ran and carefully tied them off. “You can put your clothes back on now.”

Mo Ran turned his head around to peek at Shi Mei. Under the dim yellow light of the candles, Shi Mei’s skin was snowy pale. Mo Ran’s desire flared even more, his throat going dry. He really didn’t want to get dressed, but after a moment of hesitation, he lowered his head and quickly draped his outer robe back over his shoulders. “Shi Mei.”

“Mm?”

It was just the two of them in this library, secluded and hidden. The atmosphere was quite good. Mo Ran at first wanted to recite some earthshakingly romantic lines of poetry, but unfortunately, he was the kind of illiterate who could name his own ruling era something akin to “Cock.” He stumbled over his words for a good while until his face turned red, and he only managed to choke out three words: “You’re really nice.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s just a matter of course.”

“I’m also going to be really nice to you.” Mo Ran carefully controlled his tone to be calm, but his palms were sweating nonstop, betraying the stormy waves in his heart. “When I become strong, I won’t let anyone bully you. Not even Shizun.”

Shi Mei didn’t know why Mo Ran was saying these things out of the blue. He hesitated for a moment, but still softly replied, “All right, then. I’ll be counting on A-Ran from now on.”

“Mm-hmm…” Mo Ran mumbled his response but grew increasingly fidgety under Shi Mei’s expressive gaze. He didn’t dare to keep looking and so lowered his head. He was always meticulously careful toward this person —and determined in his dedication.

“Ah, Shizun asked you to clean all these books? And catalogue them overnight too?”

Mo Ran absolutely had to save face in front of the person he liked. “It’s not that bad. I can do it, I’ve just gotta pick up the pace a little.”

“Let me help,” said Shi Mei.

“No way. If Shizun finds out, he’ll punish you too,” Mo Ran said resolutely. “It’s getting late. You should go back and get some rest; we have

class tomorrow morning."

Shi Mei tugged his hand, laughing softly. "Don't worry, he won't notice. We'll be super quiet—"

He didn't even get to finish his sentence before an ice-cold voice interrupted. "And what exactly are you going to do super quietly?"

While they weren't paying attention, Chu Wanning had come out of the machinery workshop. His expression was frigid, and his phoenix eyes were filled with endless frost. He stared at them from where he stood at the door to the library, wearing a thin layer of white robes, no emotion on his face. For a moment, his gaze paused on their clasped hands before moving away. "Shi Mingjing, Mo Weiyu, you've got some nerve."

Shi Mei's face paled instantly, and he abruptly let go of Mo Ran's hand. "Shizun…" he said in a small voice.

Mo Ran also recognized that the situation was bad and lowered his head. "Shizun."

Chu Wanning stepped into the library, ignoring Mo Ran to look down instead at Shi Mei, who was kneeling on the floor. "There are barriers set throughout the Red Lotus Pavilion," he said coolly. "Did you really think I wouldn't know if someone came in unannounced?"

Shi Mei lowered his head to the floor, frightened. "This disciple was wrong."

Mo Ran panicked. "Shizun, Shi Mei just came by to help me change my bandages. He was just about to leave. Please don't scold him."

Shi Mei also panicked. "Shizun, this has nothing to do with Mo-shidi. This disciple was wrong and is willing to accept his punishment."

Chu Wanning was silent as his face started to turn blue. He'd barely even said anything, and already these two were hurrying to cover for one another, as if he was some kind of scourge against whom they had to band together. Chu Wanning remained silent for a while, suppressing the twitch of his eyebrows with some difficulty. "Such compassion between fellow disciples—how touching," he said in a detached manner. "Looks like I'm the villain here, then."

"Shizun…" said Mo Ran.

“Don’t speak to me.” Chu Wanning shook out his wide sleeves, unwilling to keep talking.

Mo Ran wasn’t sure why he was so mad. Perhaps it was because his shizun had always hated people being touchy-feely in front of him. The specific kind of touchy-feely was irrelevant; all of it sullied his eyes.

All three of them were silent for a long while.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning turned to depart.

The rims of Shi Mei’s eyes were red as he looked up, helpless and confused. “Shizun?”

“Copy the sect rules ten times. You may leave.”

Shi Mei lowered his gaze, paused for a moment, and softly replied, “Understood.”

Mo Ran remained kneeling in the same spot.

Shi Mei stood up, glanced at Mo Ran, and hesitated. After a long while, he knelt back down to plead with Chu Wanning. “Shizun, Mo-shidi’s injuries have only just healed. It might be bold of this disciple to ask, but please go easy on him.”

Chu Wanning stood alone under the lantern’s flickering candlelight and didn’t respond. After a while and without warning, he turned his head toward them, sharp eyebrows lifted and eyes scorching, an angry rebuke on his lips. “Aren’t you just full of nonsense. Why are you still here?”

Chu Wanning was remarkably handsome but completely lacking in gentleness, and he was even scarier when mad. Shi Mei shuddered fearfully and quickly left with a bow to avoid further provoking their shizun and bringing Mo Ran even more trouble.

With only the two of them left in the library, Mo Ran sighed to himself. “Shizun, this disciple was wrong. This disciple will continue the cataloguing this instant.”

Unexpectedly, Chu Wanning spoke without even turning his head, “You can go back if you’re tired.”

Mo Ran’s head snapped up.

“I won’t keep you,” Chu Wanning continued icily.

Why would he let me off this easily? It must be a trap! Thinking himself clever, Mo Ran said, “I’m not leaving.”

Chu Wanning paused, then smiled coldly. “Fine. Suit yourself.”

With that, he swept his sleeves, turned, and left.

Mo Ran was stunned.

It hadn’t been a trap? He’d thought for sure that Chu Wanning had been ready to give him another round of lashings with that willow vine.

It took Mo Ran well into the night before he was done. Yawning, he headed out of the library. Despite the late hour, a low yellow light could still be seen from Chu Wanning’s bedroom.

Eh? That pesky demon hadn’t yet gone to bed?

Mo Ran went over to bid Chu Wanning goodnight before leaving. Once inside, he realized that Chu Wanning had already fallen asleep, it was just that the forgetful man had neglected to put out the candles before going to bed.

Or maybe he’d passed out from exhaustion in the middle of making something. Mo Ran figured that this was probably what had happened, once he saw the prototype Holy Night Guardian pieced together by the bedside, the metal gloves that Chu Wanning hadn’t taken off, and the half piece of mechanical clasp tightly gripped in his hand.

Chu Wanning wasn’t so harsh and frigid when asleep. He was curled up on the bed, which was stacked with machine parts, saws, and axes. There were too many things spread out everywhere and not much space left to accommodate a person, and so he was huddled tightly in on himself, body balled up and long lashes lowered. The sight was unexpectedly lonesome.

Mo Ran stared at him blankly for a moment. Exactly what…had Chu Wanning been so angry about today? Was it just because Shi Mei had trespassed on the Red Lotus Pavilion and tried to help Mo Ran organize the books?

Mo Ran approached the bed and rolled his eyes. He leaned down near Chu Wanning’s ear and, in a very, very quiet voice, experimentally called out, “Shizun?”

“Mm…” Chu Wanning let out a mumbled groan and hugged the cold machine parts in his arms even more tightly to himself. He was in a deep slumber, his breaths even. The sharp metal glove still on his hand lay next to his face, looking quite like the claws of a cat or leopard.

Realizing that he probably wouldn’t wake up anytime soon, Mo Ran felt a jolt in his heart and narrowed his eyes, the corners of his lips curving into a mischievous grin. He hovered over Chu Wanning’s ear and said in a low, testing voice, “Shizun, wake up.”

Nothing.

“Shizun?”

Nothing.

“Chu Wanning?”

Still nothing.

“Heh, he’s really asleep.” Mo Ran was delighted. He propped his arm up next to the pillow and looked at him with a grin. “Perfect. I’ll take this chance to settle the score with you.”

Unaware that someone wanted to settle a score with him, Chu Wanning remained fast asleep, handsome features appearing quite peaceful.

Mo Ran assumed an imposing posture. Unfortunately, he’d grown up in a pleasure house and didn’t have much in the way of a formal education. He had instead been more influenced by street arguments and folktales. The phrases he cobbled together were thus especially lame and laughable.

“O bold and wicked member of the Chu clan, you duplicitous traitor, you impudent… You… Hmm, you…”

He scratched his head, having run out of phrases. Even when he’d become emperor, the insults that had come out of his mouth had been either “this bitch” or “that bastard.” But these words seemed ill-fitting for Chu Wanning.

He racked his brain for a good long while before remembering something the girls back at the pleasure house used to say. Although he wasn’t too sure what it meant, it seemed okay enough. And so he furrowed his brow into a fearsome frown and said sharply: “You fickle, ungrateful, despicable little trollop, do you acknowledge your misdeeds?”

Chu Wanning didn't respond.

"If you don't speak, this venerable one shall consider it a confession!"

Chu Wanning let out another mumble, perhaps disturbed by the noise, but he remained fast asleep, cradling the machine components.

"Your transgressions are grave. According to the law, this venerable one sentences you…hm…sentences you to Mouth Punishment! Liu-gong!"

The familiar name slipped easily out of Mo Ran's mouth. It was only after he said it that he realized that "Liu-gong" was a person from his past life, who was now long gone.

Mo Ran contemplated this for a moment before he decided to act out the missing part himself. So, he responded in an obsequious tone, "Your Imperial Majesty, your old servant is present."

Then he cleared his throat and said solemnly, "Carry out the punishment right away."

"As you command, Your Imperial Majesty."

All right, enough with the formalities. Mo Ran flexed his fingers and began to "carry out the punishment" of Chu Wanning.

This so-called Mouth Punishment didn't actually exist; Mo Ran had made it up on the spot. And how would this improvised punishment be carried out?

The once-tyrant emperor Mo Ran solemnly cleared his throat again. His gaze wintry and wicked, he slowly pressed in close to that face, which looked as frigid as a clear spring in a snowy valley, and gradually drew near that pair of pale lips. And then…

Mo Ran stopped. Glaring at Chu Wanning, he cursed, enunciating each word slowly: "Chu Wanning, fuck you and your peerless pettiness."

Pah. Pah.

Two slaps in the air.

Heh heh, punishment complete! Fuck yeah!

Mo Ran was in the midst of rejoicing when he felt a sudden prickle on his neck and a change in the atmosphere. He jerked his gaze down only to be met by a pair of lofty and forbidding phoenix eyes.

Mo Ran couldn't speak.

Chu Wanning's voice was clear like the shattering of jade and as cold as an icy lake, equal parts elegant and chilling. "What are you doing?"

"This venerable one…puh. Your old serv…puh, puh, puh!"

Fortunately, Mo Ran had spoken softly; though Chu Wanning was frowning a little, he seemed to not have heard clearly. Struck by an idea, Mo Ran reached out and slapped the air near Chu Wanning's face two more times.

Faced with his shizun's darkening expression, the once-Emperor of the Mortal Realm gave him a mollifying grin. "Th-this disciple was killing mosquitoes for Shizun."

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Chapter 10:
This Venerable One Goes on His First Mission

FORTUNATELY, Chu Wanning hadn't heard much of Mo Ran's play pretend Mouth Punishment, so he managed to scrape by with some made-up nonsense, if only just.

It was terribly late by the time Mo Ran got back to his room. He took a nap and attended morning classes as usual the next day. After these classes came his favorite morning activity: breakfast.

As morning classes ended, Mengpo Hall gradually filled with people. Mo Ran took the seat across from Shi Mei. Xue Meng, having come too late to snag the spot next to Shi Mei, was reluctantly forced to sit next to Mo Ran with a gloomy face and only his own lateness to blame.

If anybody were to ask Mo Ran to name the best aspect of Sisheng Peak's teachings, he would definitely say it was that this sect's cultivation didn't require fasting. Unlike the lofty, ethereal sects of the upper cultivation realm, Sisheng Peak's cultivation method didn't mandate abstinence from meat or any other foods, so the meals there had always been sumptuous.

Mo Ran drank from a bowl of savory, spicy youcha soup, slurping up the peanut crumbs and crunchy soybeans within, and enjoyed a plate of pan-fried shengjian buns, cooked to a golden crisp, that he'd ordered just for Shi Mei.

Xue Meng gave Mo Ran a sidelong glance. "Mo Ran, it's really quite incredible that you went to Red Lotus Hell and actually managed to walk back out on your own two legs," he said mockingly. "You're a true inspiration."

"Of course," Mo Ran responded without even bothering to lift his head. "Who do you think I am?"

"Who do I think you are?" Xue Meng sneered. "Just because Shizun didn't break your legs doesn't mean you're anything more than chopped liver."

"If I'm chopped liver, then what are you?"

Xue Meng scoffed. “I am Shizun’s top disciple.”

“Self-proclaimed. Hey, why don’t you go ask Shizun for his seal of approval so you can frame it and hang it on a wall? You owe at least that much to your title of ‘top disciple.’”

Xue Meng snapped his chopsticks with a crack.

Shi Mei hastened to play mediator. “Please don’t fight. Hurry and eat.”

“Hmph.”

“Hmph,” Mo Ran mimicked Xue Meng, a shit-eating grin plastered on his face.

Xue Meng bristled, smacking the table. “How dare you!”

With the situation rapidly deteriorating, Shi Mei hurriedly held Xue Meng back. “Young master, everyone’s watching. Eat, eat—don’t fight.”

Mo Ran and Xue Meng’s horoscopes were simply incompatible; though they were cousins, they ended up bickering every time they met. Shi Mei tried without success to talk Xue Meng down. In the end, he had to resort to physically wedging himself between the two to ease the tension, placating left and right as he attempted to distract them both.

Shi Mei turned to Xue Meng. “Young master, do you know when the madam’s cat is going to give birth?”

“Oh, you mean A-Li? Mom was mistaken. She’s not pregnant, she just had a big belly from eating too much.”

Shi Mei paused, then turned to Mo Ran. “A-Ran, do you still have to go to Shizun’s place to do chores today?”

“Shouldn’t have to anymore. Everything that needed to be tidied up has been tidied. I’ll help you with copying the sect rules today.”

Shi Mei laughed. “Do you even have time to help me? Don’t you have to copy them a hundred times yourself?”

Xue Meng raised an eyebrow, looking with some astonishment at Shi Mei, who usually never put a single toe out of line. “How did *you* end up having to copy the rules?”

Shi Mei looked embarrassed, but before he could answer, silence dropped over the dining hall as all sounds of conversation ceased. The three

of them turned to see Chu Wanning enter Mengpo Hall, his white robes billowing behind him. He walked to the food counters without any expression and started selecting pastries.

More than a thousand people were eating in the hall, but with the addition of just one Chu Wanning, it swiftly became as silent as a graveyard. The disciples lowered their heads to munch on their food; if anyone talked, it was in the most hushed of tones.

Watching Chu Wanning carry his tray to his usual corner to quietly eat his congee by himself, Shi Mei let out a soft sigh. “Actually, I feel kind of sorry for Shizun sometimes.”

Mo Ran glanced up. “How so?”

“Just look: no one dares to go near where he’s sitting; no one even dares to talk loudly with him around. It was okay when the sect leader was here, but without him, Shizun doesn’t even have anyone to talk to. Isn’t that lonely?”

Mo Ran hmphed. “He brought it on himself.”

Xue Meng got angry again. “You dare to mock Shizun?”

“How am I mocking him? I’m just telling the truth.” Mo Ran put another bun on Shi Mei’s plate. “With a temper like that, who would want to hang out with him?”

“You!”

The shit-eating grin returned to Mo Ran’s face as he peered at Xue Meng. “You got a problem with me?” he drawled lazily. “Feel free to go sit with Shizun for your meals, then. Don’t hang around us.”

That shut Xue Meng right up.

Xue Meng felt great respect for Chu Wanning, but just like everyone else, he felt even greater fear. Angry and humiliated, but with nothing he could say in return, he gave the table’s leg two sound kicks and sulked by himself.

Mo Ran was the picture of languid smugness as he directed a taunting glance at the little phoenix. Then his gaze moved across the crowd and landed on Chu Wanning. He didn’t know why, but when he looked at the only white-clothed figure in the hall full of people dressed in rich blue and

silver armor, out of nowhere, he remembered that same person sleeping curled up amidst piles of cold metal the night before.

Shi Mei wasn't wrong. Chu Wanning really was quite pitiful.

But what of it? The more pitiful he was, the happier Mo Ran would be. As he thought about it, the corners of his lips couldn't help but lift even more.

The days flew by.

Chu Wanning didn't call Mo Ran to the Red Lotus Pavilion again, and so his daily chores became idle tasks like washing the dishes, feeding the chicks and ducklings Madam Wang kept, and weeding the medicinal herb garden. His month of confinement passed in the blink of an eye.

One day, Madam Wang called Mo Ran to Loyalty Hall. She patted his head as she asked, "A-Ran, how are your injuries?"

Mo Ran responded with a smile. "Thanks for worrying about me, Aunt. I'm all healed now."

"That's good. Be more mindful in the future. Don't make such big mistakes and anger your shizun again, understand?"

Mo Ran was an expert at acting pitiful. "Got it, Aunt!"

"And another thing." Madam Wang retrieved a letter from a small table made of fragrant rosewood. "It's been a full year since you entered the sect, which means it's time for you to take on exorcism duties. Your uncle sent this via messenger pigeon yesterday. Once your confinement period is over, he wants you to go down the mountain to complete this assignment."

Sisheng Peak's customs dictated that after one full year in the sect, disciples had to go see the world and gain practical hands-on experience as exorcists. On a disciple's first mission, they were accompanied by their shizun, who observed and lent aid as necessary. They also invited another disciple along in order to encourage camaraderie with their fellows and hammer home the meaning of "A loyal heart remains constant, whether in life or in death."[11]

Mo Ran's eyes brightened. He accepted the assignment letter, tore it open to read in a hurry, and started grinning in delight.

“A-Ran, your uncle entrusted you with a heavy responsibility for your mission in the hopes that you will be able to make a name for yourself,” Madam Wang said fretfully. “The Yuheng Elder is a powerful cultivator, but swords are indiscriminate in battle, and he may not necessarily be able to protect you. Don’t fool around too much, and make sure you don’t take the enemy lightly.”

“I won’t, I won’t!” Mo Ran waved her concerns away, still grinning. “Don’t worry, Aunt. I’ll take care of myself, no problem!”

He dashed off to pack.

“That child…” Madam Wang watched his retreating back, her gentle, graceful face lined with worry. “How is he so happy about simply receiving a mission?”

How could Mo Ran *not* be happy? The mission from his uncle was to look into an incident at Butterfly Town at the request of a certain Landlord Chen.

Who cared what kind of ghost or ghoul it was? What was important was that, in Mo Ran’s last lifetime, this was where he had fallen under the influence of a demonic poison and, in an addled state, forcibly kissed Shi Mei within an illusory realm. It had also been one of the very few times Mo Ran had been able to get so intimate with Shi Mei. He was so ecstatic that he was practically on cloud nine.

On top of that, because he had been under the influence of the demonic poison, Shi Mei hadn’t even been able to make a fuss. Free kiss! No consequences whatsoever!

Mo Ran was so happy he couldn’t stop smiling. He didn’t even mind the fact that Chu Wanning also had to come on the mission. He could just leave the exorcising to his master while he flirted with Shi Mei. Who would say no to such an easy job?

After Mo Ran invited Shi Mei and they reported to their shizun, the three of them headed on horse to the troubled Butterfly Town straightaway.

This town’s specialty trade was in flowers. Fields of flowers stretched for many miles beyond the residential area, and butterflies of all colors could

always be found fluttering about within the town—hence its name.

It was nightfall by the time the trio arrived, but the village entrance was bustling with activity. Drums beat out loud and clear as a procession of performers dressed in red and playing the suona turned out of an alleyway.

Shi Mei was puzzled. “Is this a marriage procession? Why is it happening at night?”

“It’s a ghost marriage,” Chu Wanning answered.

A ghost marriage, also known as a yin marriage, was a tradition among the common folk wherein they united men and women who had died young and unmarried in posthumous matrimony. This tradition was rare in poorer areas, but Butterfly Town was quite prosperous, so the practice was far from unusual there.

The showy procession was divided into two lines, one carrying bolts of satin and silk, the other carrying paper money and ingots, both escorting a sedan decorated in red and white. Lit by gold lanterns, the procession made its way out of the village.

Mo Ran’s group pulled their horses to the side to let the ghost marriage procession pass. As the sedan came near, it became clear that the person within was not a living one, but rather a ghost bride made of paper. The ghost bride’s lips were painted a bright scarlet, and two red lines on her cheeks framed a deathly pale face. Her smiling visage was extremely frightening.

“What kind of lousy tradition is this? Is money burning a hole in this town’s pocket or what?” Mo Ran muttered under his breath.

“The people of Butterfly Town are extremely superstitious,” said Chu Wanning. “It is their belief that solitary graves attract lone souls and stray spirits, bringing misfortune to the family.”

“That’s not actually a thing, right?”

“It is real as long as the townsfolk believe it to be.”

Mo Ran sighed. “I guess. Butterfly Town’s been around for hundreds of years. If you were to tell them now that their superstitions don’t actually matter, they probably wouldn’t be able to accept it.”

“Where’s this procession going?” Shi Mei asked in a quiet voice.

“We passed a temple earlier,” said Chu Wanning. “The one enshrined inside was not a god, and a decorative cut-out of the wedding character Xi[12] was pasted on the door. The altar was piled with red satin, upon which had written phrases such as ‘match made in heaven,’ ‘harmony in the afterlife’ and the like. I believe that’s probably their destination.”

“I also noticed that temple.” Shi Mei looked pensive. “Shizun, is the one enshrined within that temple a ghost mistress of ceremonies?”

“That is correct.”

A ghost mistress of ceremonies was a ghostly entity born of the imagination of the common people. They believed that the souls of the departed also needed to follow the proper customs when marrying. Therefore, the deceased pair needed to be witnessed by a mistress of ceremonies to certify that they had indeed become husband and wife. Since ghost marriages were a common tradition in Butterfly Town, it followed that they had made a gilt idol for the ghost mistress of ceremonies, which they had enshrined at the entrance to the cemetery outside town. The families holding ghost marriages would accordingly stop by with the ghost bride to worship at the temple before the burial.

Mo Ran had rarely seen such ridiculous practices before and watched with great interest.

But Chu Wanning only gave the procession a brief, ambivalent glance before turning his horse around. “Let’s go. We must check on the family being haunted.”

“Three honored Daozhang, I’ve suffered so much! You’re finally here! If someone hadn’t come to take care of this soon, I—I wouldn’t even want to live anymore!”

The client who had asked Sisheng Peak to perform the exorcism was the richest merchant in town, Landlord Chen.

The Chen family dealt in perfumed powder and had four sons and a daughter. After the eldest son’s marriage, the newlyweds had sought to move out, as the new wife had disliked how noisy the family was. The Chen family had riches and reputation to spare, so they’d purchased a large plot of land in a secluded area by the mountain north of town, one situated in a nice spot that

even had a natural hot spring.

But on the first day of construction, they'd only dug a couple shovels into the mountain ground before they hit something hard. The wife had moved over to take a look only to immediately swoon from fright—somehow, they had dug up a brand-new, red-painted coffin.

Butterfly Town had a designated burial ground where all their deceased were interred, but this solitary coffin had inexplicably shown up at this mountain. Not only that, it had neither grave nor marker, and the entire coffin had been painted bloodred.

Of course they hadn't dared to proceed any further and had hurriedly covered it back up. But it had been too late. Ever since that day, strange events had befallen the Chens.

"First it was that daughter-in-law of mine," Landlord Chen lamented. "The fright affected her baby and she miscarried. Then it was my eldest son; he went into the mountains to collect medicinal herbs to help his wife recover, but he slipped and fell, and by the time we found him, he was dead…" He expelled a long sigh and waved his hand, too choked up to continue.

Madam Chen dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief. "My husband is right. In the months after that, each of our sons met with misfortune, one after another. If not disappearance, then death—of our four sons, three are already gone!"

Chu Wanning's brow furrowed as he glanced past the couple, and his gaze landed upon the pale-faced youngest son. The boy looked to be about the same age as Mo Ran, fifteen or sixteen, and had delicate features, though they were now twisted with fear.

"Would you mind telling us how your other sons…?" Shi Mei asked. "How did they die?"

Madam Chen sighed. "Our second son went to look for his brother and was bitten by a snake on the way. It was just a regular grass snake, not poisonous, so at the time, no one paid it any mind. But a couple days later, he just fell over while eating, and then…" She let out a sob. "My son…"

Shi Mei exhaled, feeling terrible for having to push. "Then were there signs that he had indeed been poisoned?"

“Ha, what poison? Our family’s definitely been cursed! The oldest sons are all dead and the youngest is next! He’s next, I tell you!”

Chu Wanning frowned, gaze snapping to Madam Chen. “How do you know that the youngest son is next and not yourself? Does this malicious spirit only kill men?”

The youngest son of the Chen family cowered to the side, his legs shaking and his eyes swollen like peaches. Even his voice squeaked and contorted as he said, “It’s me! It’s going to be me! I know it! The person in the red coffin is coming! He’s coming! Daozhang, Daozhang, save me! Daozhang, save me!”

He began to lose it as he spoke, scrambling over to try to hug Chu Wanning’s thigh.

Chu Wanning had always been averse to physical contact with strangers and immediately sidestepped him. He lifted his head to stare at the Chens. “What exactly is this about?”

The couple exchanged a glance and spoke with quavering voices: “There’s a place in this house… W-we’re afraid to go near it again. Daozhang will understand when he sees. It’s truly evil, truly—”

“What place?” Chu Wanning interrupted.

They hesitated for a moment, then pointed toward the ancestral shrine room with shaking hands. “There…”

Chu Wanning led the way, followed closely by Mo Ran and Shi Mei. The Chen family trailed behind at a distance.

They pushed open a door to a room that looked no different from the ancestral shrines of other large families, with rows of memorial tablets flanked on both sides by pale candlelight. All of the tablets in the room were painted yellow, with the names and positions of the departed engraved thereon. The writing was neat and careful: *Esteemed Spirit of So-and-So Ancestor*, *Esteemed Spirit of So-and-So Ancestor*, so on and so forth.

But in the very center, there stood a tablet with lettering that wasn’t carved and painted but written in a vivid red: *Spirit of Chen Yanji. Erected by a living member of the Chen-Sun Clan*.

The Chen family, who had been hiding behind them, peeked into the

shrine room that was draped in fluttering white silks. Perhaps they hoped for a fluke. But those letters on the tablet, which seemed to have been written in blood, were still there, and they broke down immediately.

Madam Chen wailed loudly, and the youngest son's face was so pale that he hardly even looked alive.

First, the phrasing on this tablet didn't conform to that of traditional funerary rites. Second, the characters were extremely messy, as if the writer had been about to fall asleep and struggling to write, so much so that they were nearly illegible.

Shi Mei turned his head and asked, "Who is Chen Yanji?"

"Th-that's me," answered the youngest son from behind him, his voice shaking with sobs.

Landlord Chen wept as he spoke. "Daozhang, it's like this. Ever since our second son passed, we noticed that…that a new tablet had been added to the ancestral shrine, but that the names written on it were those of living people from our family. Once a name appears, that person is doomed to meet disaster within seven days! When our third son's name appeared on the tablet, I shut him in his room and sprinkled incense dust by his door, and I even got someone to come cast some spells. We tried everything, but—on the seventh day! He still died… No cause whatsoever, just died!"

The more Landlord Chen spoke, the more emotional and afraid he became, and he even dropped to his knees. "I've never committed any wrongdoing in my life—why must the heavens treat me so?! Why!"

Shi Mei's heart ached for the old man, and he hurriedly went to comfort him as he cried to the heavens. He looked up and said softly, "Shizun, this…"

Chu Wanning hadn't even turned around. He was staring at that tablet with great interest, as if flowers were about to bloom from it. Suddenly, he asked, "A living member of the Chen-Sun clan—is that referring to you, Madam Chen?"

Chapter 11:
This Venerable One Is Gonna Smooch, Rejoice!

"Y-YES, THAT'S ME!" said Madam Chen, weeping. "But I didn't write on the tablet! Why would I curse my own child? I—"

"Indeed, you would not have done it while awake, but that's not necessarily true when you're asleep." Chu Wanning lifted his hand to pick up the memorial tablet as he spoke, channeling spiritual energy into his palm.

Suddenly, bloodcurdling screams erupted from the tablet, followed instantly by a heavy, festering scent of the blood that trickled forth from it.

Chu Wanning's eyes were cold and piercing, his voice stern. "Arrogant, wicked spirit—you dare to run so rampant!"

Faced with the potent spiritual power gathered in his palm, the writing on the tablet was forced to recede bit by bit, screaming as it did. It soon became faded and, finally, vanished altogether. Chu Wanning squeezed with his pale, slender fingers, and the entire memorial tablet shattered.

The Chen family, watching from behind, was stunned.

Even Shi Mei was struck. He couldn't help exhaling, "How impressive."

Mo Ran also couldn't help exhaling, albeit internally. *How vicious*.

Chu Wanning's face turned slightly in their direction. His elegant features were devoid of feeling, but a few specks of blood had splattered his cheek. He lifted his hand to examine the blood on his fingertips before speaking to the Chen family. "All of you, stay in the courtyard today. Don't go anywhere."

Obviously, none of them would dare do anything but comply after that display, and they promptly answered, "Yes! Yes! We'll obey Daozhang's every instruction!"

Chu Wanning strode out of the shrine room, indifferently wiping the bloodstains off of his face. He lifted a finger to point at Madam Chen. "Especially you. Do not fall asleep under any circumstances. That thing is

capable of possession, so you must remain awake no matter how drowsy you become."

"Yes…yes, yes, yes!" Madam Chen agreed repeatedly. Then she asked tearily, with a measure of hesitance, "Then, Daozhang, my son…is…is he safe?"

"For now."

Madam Chen stared blankly. "For now? Not forever? Th-then what must be done to keep my son safe?"

"The demon must be captured," Chu Wanning replied.

In her panicked worry, Madam Chen forgot her manners and threw courtesy aside to ask urgently, "And just when is Daozhang planning to go capture it?"

"Right now." Chu Wanning's gaze swept over the Chen family. "Which of you knows the exact location of the red coffin's exhumation? Lead the way."

The surname of the eldest son's wife was Yao. Despite being a woman, she was tall and gallant. Though her face had some dread in it as well, she was relatively calm compared to the others, and immediately offered her help. "I know the location, since it was selected by my late husband and myself. I will guide Daozhang."

Chu Wanning, Mo Ran, and Shi Mei followed Madam Chen-Yao. Heading north, they soon arrived at the plot of land that the Chens had purchased. The area was overgrown and poorly lit, and it had been cordoned off—there was no one around for miles. It was also completely silent; not even the sounds of birds and insects could be heard.

Halfway up the mountain, the foliage gave way to a clearing.

"Honored Daozhangs, this is the place," said Madam Chen-Yao.

A grave-sealing rock lay on top of where the red coffin had been dug up. Mo Ran burst out laughing at the sight of it. "What good is that crappy rock gonna do? It's clearly the work of amateurs. Just toss it aside."

Madam Chen-Yao was apprehensive. "But the professional from town who we consulted said that the demonic beast inside the rock holds the evil spirit down and keeps it from getting out."

Mo Ran smiled sarcastically. “That professional sure has been effective so far.”

Madam Chen-Yao balked. “Toss it aside! Toss, toss, toss!”

“No need,” Chu Wanning said grimly. He lifted his hand, fingertips glowing golden as Tianwen answered his call. A single flick of the willow vine, and the rock shattered to pieces. Expressionless, Chu Wanning walked over to stand amidst the debris and once again raised his hand in a threat. “What are you hiding for? Get the hell up!”

A strange grinding sound came from below before a twelve-foot-tall wooden coffin burst forth from the ground, spraying earth and dust that flew everywhere.

“This coffin has such aggressive demonic energy!” Shi Mei said, startled.

“Step back,” said Chu Wanning.

Tianwen struck the tightly sealed red coffin in a backhanded lash, sending sparks flying. There was a moment of silence, then the lid of the coffin shot open, and the object inside was revealed as the thick smoke from the explosion dispersed.

Inside the coffin was a completely naked man. He had a straight nose and handsome features and would have looked merely asleep, if not for the paper-pale pallor of his skin.

Mo Ran’s gaze zoomed below the man’s waist, then he made a show of covering his eyes. “Aiya, the stinky jackass isn’t wearing any pants.”

Shi Mei and Chu Wanning stared at him.

“My husband!” Madam Chen-Yao cried out, surprised. She made to rush toward the coffin without a second thought but was restrained by Chu Wanning, who reached out to hold her back.

“This is your husband?” he asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes! That’s my husband!” Madam Chen-Yao was stricken with both fear and grief. “How did he end up here? We definitely interred him at the ancestral grave, fully dressed in burial clothes. How did he…” Before she could finish, she began to bawl, beating her chest in anguish. “How could this happen?! So wretched—so wretched! My husband…my husband!”

“Madam Chen,” Shi Mei murmured, “My condolences.”

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran, on the other hand, both ignored the weeping woman. Chu Wanning didn’t know how to comfort people, and Mo Ran had no compassion to speak of. Both their attentions were fixed on the corpse in the coffin.

Mo Ran had already gone through this once before and so knew more or less what was coming. But he had to act his part, so he stroked his chin and remarked, “Shizun, something’s fishy about this corpse.”

“I know,” Chu Wanning replied.

Mo Ran paused. He’d actually had an entire speech planned out, ripped directly from Chu Wanning’s original explanation and analysis from their previous lifetime. He’d wanted to whip it out in this one to give Chu Wanning a shock—but how could he have predicted that Chu Wanning would just casually throw out an “I know”?

As a teacher, wasn’t he supposed to encourage his disciples to speak their minds, and to praise and reward them for doing so?!

Refusing to give up, Mo Ran pretended not to have heard that “I know” and kept going. “This corpse shows no signs of decomposing. Chen-gongzi died over half a month ago; in this kind of climate, he should’ve long since started rotting and leaking pus, and a layer of fluid from decay should have accumulated in the coffin. That is the first problem.”

Chu Wanning shot him a cold “you may continue” kind of look, but he said nothing.

Unaffected, Mo Ran continued to recite Chu Wanning’s explanation from his previous lifetime. “Second, the demonic energy emanating from this red coffin was very strong before it opened, but conversely, it vanished after it did so. Moreover, there’s practically no demonic energy on the corpse itself, which is also quite abnormal.”

Chu Wanning said nothing.

“Third, have you noticed that, ever since the moment the coffin opened, there’s been a sweet fragrance on the wind?”

The scent was awfully subdued; one wouldn’t have noticed it at all without paying careful attention. At Mo Ran’s words, Shi Mei and Madam

Chen-Yao realized that there was indeed a faint, sweet smell in the air.

"You're right," said Shi Mei.

Madam Chen-Yao sniffed, and her face blanched. "This fragrance…"

"Mistress Chen, what is it?" asked Shi Mei.

Madam Chen-Yao was so scared that even her voice changed tone. "This fragrance is my mother-in-law's secret formula: Hundred Butterfly Fragrance!"

No one spoke for a moment. That line written on the memorial tablet in the shrine room, "Erected by a living member of the Chen-Sun Clan," seemed to appear before their eyes.

"Could it be that this whole thing really is the elder Madam Chen's doing?" Shi Mei asked.

"It's unlikely," said Mo Ran.

"It is not," said Chu Wanning.

The two spoke at nearly the same time, then looked at each other.

Chu Wanning's look remained even. "Go ahead."

Mo Ran spoke without modesty. "As far as I know, the Chen family made their fortune off of the madam's unique Hundred Butterfly Fragrance. Its formula is kept secret, but the finished product isn't hard to obtain. More than half the girls in Butterfly Town wear this perfume. In addition, we looked into this beforehand, and it seems that Chen-gongzi also quite liked his mother's Hundred Butterfly Fragrance and often mixed it into his bathwater when bathing. So it's not at all strange that his body carries the scent. What is strange is that…" He turned his head back toward the naked man in the coffin. "He's been dead for half a month, but this fragrance is as fresh as if it had only just been applied. Am I right, Shizun?"

Chu Wanning was silent.

"If I'm right, could you praise me just a teensy-weensy little bit?" Mo Ran asked.

Chu Wanning said only, "Mn."

Mo Ran laughed. "You really don't like to waste words."

He'd hardly gotten in two chuckles before they were lost in a flurry of billowing robes as Chu Wanning grabbed him and swiftly moved them back several feet. In his hand, Tianwen glowed brightly golden, fiery light dancing. "Look out."

The smell of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air suddenly thickened, and a white fog materialized as the scent filled the clearing, spreading with alarming speed. Almost instantly, the entire area became a sea of fog so dense that one couldn't even see the fingers on their own hand.

Mo Ran's heart stirred. The illusory realm was unfolding.

"Ah!" Madam Chen-Yao's shriek was the first thing he heard in the thick fog. "Daozhang, hel—"

She didn't get to finish before the sound of her voice was cut off.

Chu Wanning's fingertip glowed blue as he placed a tracking enchantment on Mo Ran's forehead. "Be careful. I'm going to check out the situation."

Then he quickly disappeared into the impenetrable fog, heading in the direction of Madam Chen-Yao's cry.

Mo Ran touched his forehead, laughing in low tones. "Well, well, well. Even the position of the enchantment is exactly the same as in my last lifetime. Chu Wanning, you really haven't changed at all."

The fog dispersed as quickly as it came, and before long, it was completely gone. However, the scene that revealed itself to Mo Ran was even more startling than the fog had been. At least, it had given him quite the scare in his last lifetime.

When the fog disappeared, the desolate and overgrown mountain he should've seen was gone. In its place was a vast expanse of an intricate and elegant garden landscape, filled with pavilions and winding verandas, rock gardens and verdant trees, and a cobblestone path that stretched beyond what the eye could see.

The mere sight of this place made Mo Ran want to roll on the ground in joy. This tyrannical jackass had been thinking about this very illusory realm all day. In his previous life, they'd all become separated here as well. Mo Ran had run into Shi Mei first, and under the illusion's enchantment, had

kissed him for the first—and only—time in his life.

Unfortunately, that time, Shi Mei had fled as soon as Mo Ran let go, perhaps out of fright. Mo Ran had barely even gotten a taste of sweet nectar before it was snatched away, leaving him terribly unsatisfied.

Later, after the illusory realm was broken, Shi Mei hadn't kicked up a fuss about it. It was as if the kiss had never even occurred, and neither of them ever brought it up again. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Mo Ran had wondered if it had just been a fantasy born of his deep obsession.

Fantasy or not, Mo Ran thought as he licked his lips, *Shi Mei isn't getting away that easily this time! I'm gonna get my fill of smooches all at once!*

Chapter 12:
This Venerable One Kissed the Wrong Person… WTF...

MO RAN WANDERED around the illusory realm for a long time but still couldn't get his bearings. Meanwhile, the scent of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air grew stronger and stronger. When someone was exposed to the scent for too long, they developed heightened emotions and enhanced senses, and they would find themselves compelled to do all manner of unreasonable things.

Mo Ran gradually grew increasingly agitated and restless. It was as if a flame had been lit in his stomach and was slowly heating the blood coursing through his body to a boiling point.

Water. He needed to find some water. Where was that spring again?

He knew there was a spring in the illusory realm. The last time around, he'd been parched and dizzy when he found it and, left with no other choice, had scooped up and drunk several handfuls of the water, thinking that death by poison was still preferable to death by thirst.

He'd felt his awareness become blurrier and blurrier after drinking the spring water, and he'd been fading in and out of consciousness by the time Shi Mei found him. Shi Mei cultivated the healing arts and had promptly set about dispelling the poison in his body, at which point Mo Ran, dizzy and addled under the poisonous enchantment's influence, had kissed Shi Mei on the lips as if possessed.

The vigorous and decisive ex-Emperor of the Mortal Realm desperately wanted a repeat of this dream-like encounter with the person of his desires. He wandered around the illusory realm for a long time before finally hearing the tinkling of spring water. Overjoyed, he dashed over and drank to his heart's content without a moment's hesitation.

As he'd expected, the spring water exacerbated the fretful agitation that had been brought on by that scent. More than anything, he wanted to go deeper into the spring, and before he knew it, half his body was submerged.

Just like in his last lifetime, as Mo Ran was about to lose

consciousness, a hand swiftly pulled him out, sending water flying. Air rushed back into his nose and Mo Ran gasped, water droplets dangling from his eyelashes as they fluttered open to let him look upon the figure in front of him.

The figure slowly came into focus, accompanied by a voice that sounded almost angry. “What’s wrong with you, drinking the water here? Are you trying to die?”

Mo Ran shook the water off like a wet dog and breathed in relief when he confirmed who it was. “Shi Mei…”

“Stop talking and take this medicine!”

Mo Ran opened his mouth and obediently swallowed the purple pill, eyes fixed on Shi Mei’s incomparably lovely face.

Suddenly, just like in his last lifetime, those intense feelings of agitation made him lose all restraint—not that he was any kind of honorable man to begin with—and he captured Shi Mei’s wrist, quickly pressing their lips together before Shi Mei could react.

Instantly, sparks flew everywhere, and his mind went totally blank.

Mo Ran was a man with a sordid history of promiscuity, but passion between the sheets needed no contact between the lips, no unnecessary affections. Hence, his carnal entanglements were many but his kisses pitifully few.

Shi Mei hadn’t at all expected to be attacked like this, and he froze in shock until a tongue intruded inside his mouth. Only then did he finally react and start struggling.

“What are you do—mmph!” He only managed half a sentence before his face was turned back roughly and his lips were covered once again.

Mo Ran kissed him more intensely than he had in his previous life. The two tangled into a heap by the side of the spring, Mo Ran keeping Shi Mei pressed firmly under his body as he kissed those dewy, somewhat chilly lips, the sensation as breathtaking as in his memory. His mouth moved to Shi Mei’s cheek, his ear…

“Stop moving…” The huskiness of his voice surprised even himself.

Fuck. The spring water’s effect seemed somehow more intense than it

had been in his last life.

The way things had gone last time around, he hadn't actually been able to make out with Shi Mei all that long. After getting a few pecks in, the young Mo Ran had been struck by his conscience. His grip had loosened, and Shi Mei had shot up and fled across the water with qinggong.

But in this lifetime, Mo Ran was vile and shameless. He had no conscience to strike him, only desire to urge him on. He kissed Shi Mei as much as he pleased, holding his body down by the side of the spring.

Beneath him, Shi Mei struggled and cried out in anger, but Mo Ran's heart was possessed, and he couldn't make out what Shi Mei was saying at all. He could only see that lovely face swaying back and forth in his vision, that pair of dewy, alluring lips opening and closing.

It felt as if a ball of fire had been ignited in his abdomen. Mo Ran gave in to his longings, and his kisses grew increasingly more ravenous as he pried open Shi Mei's jaw and pushed his tongue into his mouth, plundering the sweetness inside.

His heart thudded like drumbeats in his chest.

Amidst the chaos, he had already ripped off Shi Mei's intricate outer robe and torn open his belt sash. His hand slid down and caressed smooth, firm skin. The body underneath his jerked at the touch but was again pressed back down by Mo Ran.

He bit at Shi Mei's ear, whispering, "Be obedient; it'll be good for both of us."

"Mo Weiyu—!"

"Aiya, aiya, are you that mad, to call my name like a stranger?" Mo Ran smiled as he licked the other man's earlobe. His hand wasn't idle either, groping directly toward his waist.

Mo Ran was categorically a piece-of-shit jackass, but the sixteen-year-old budding jackass of his previous lifetime simply couldn't compare to the thirty-two-year-old veteran jackass of the present. This guy grew more shameless with each passing day.

Shi Mei's entire body was tense, and Mo Ran could feel him trembling slightly. Really, he looked like such a slender person, but the contours of his

body were surprisingly toned under Mo Ran's hand. His desires ran even more rampant, self-control slipping further away as he pulled at Shi Mei's inner robes.

Shi Mei finally hit the limits of his endurance. "Mo Weiyu! Are you tired of living?!"

There was a loud bang, and a burst of intense spiritual energy tossed Mo Ran aside. The power was ferocious, and Mo Ran was caught completely off guard. His entire body was flung to the side, flipping over and slamming against a rock by the side of the spring, and he nearly coughed up blood.

Shi Mei clutched at his disheveled clothing as he stood, flustered. Golden spiritual energy crackled in a frenzy at his palm, and sparks flew audibly, mirroring the fury in his eyes.

Mo Ran was dizzy from the impact, but even then, he had a vague sense that something wasn't quite right.

"Tianwen, come!"

Following the enraged bellow, a golden willow vine appeared in Shi Mei's hand as Tianwen answered his call. The willow vine glowed piercingly bright, streaks of fire and bursts of gold coursing along its length, willow leaves swirling in the air.

Mo Ran was stunned. Since when had Shi Mei learned how to summon Tianwen?

The thought hadn't even settled in his mind before Tianwen viciously ripped through the air toward him. There was no reservation whatsoever in that lashing, and the blood of the despicable scoundrel Taxian-jun was spilt without mercy. If anyone who had suffered at Mo Ran's hands were to see this scene—like Rong Jiu—they would no doubt have clapped and cheered, "Nice one! Awesome! Do it again! Vanquish the evildoer! What a good deed!"

Under this relentless storm of brutal lashings, Mo Ran finally sobered up.

Shi Mei was so gentle. How could this be him? Who but Chu Wanning was so greatly skilled at whipping people?!

Chu Wanning's hand grew tired from all the whipping, and only then

did he pause to take a breath, rubbing his wrist. He was just about to continue when Mo Ran, leaning against the rock, coughed up a large mouthful of blood.

"No more… I'll really die…" Mo Ran coughed up yet more blood and felt his heart sink to the depths of the abyss. That had definitely been the best and most remarkable highlight in his history of debauchery.

Why the fuck was it Chu Wanning who'd come for him?

What's more, for some reason, Chu Wanning had worn Shi Mei's face. Even his voice had sounded exactly the same!

Mo Ran wiped the blood from the corners of his mouth and looked up, panting. Perhaps it was due to the beating, or perhaps it was because the medicine Chu Wanning had given him earlier was finally starting to work, but when he raised his head this time, the person before him was no longer Shi Mei.

Chu Wanning seethed from where he stood under a tree, his face dark as he glared at Mo Ran, his eyes like twin bolts of lightning. That vicious and enraged look of his really was frightening. But…

Mo Ran stared for a few seconds. And realized that he…had grown shamelessly hard.

Chu Wanning was always immaculately dressed, not a hair out of place, but right now, his intricate white robes—usually worn with collars high and tightly closed—were an untidy mess, held up only by the tight grip of his pale, slender hand. His lips were red and swollen from kisses, and love bites peppered the side of his neck. His expression was fierce, but that only added to his allure.

Mo Ran's recollections of Chu Wanning from his past life were full of insanity, bloodlust, hatred, recklessness, conquest, pleasure—memory upon memory, piling up one after another.

Memories that Mo Ran had not thought of, had not even planned to recall, abruptly resurfaced amidst the rusty tang of blood in the air mixed with the scent of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance. They were shockingly vivid, impossible to block out, and they swelled like the tide to flood his thoughts.

Fuck. In the end, he really couldn't afford to see Chu Wanning look

like this after all.

Even if he loathed him, hated him, so much so that he wanted to chop him up and make him into wontons and eat him, Mo Ran had to admit that in his previous life, his most fervent entanglements, his most intense climaxes, all of them had been gotten off of Chu Wanning's body.

Hating him was one thing. But as a man, especially a vulgar, shameless man like Mo Ran, the body's instinctive reaction was another matter altogether.

Chu Wanning let out a breath. He seemed genuinely furious, and the hand holding Tianwen shook slightly. "Finally come to your senses?"

Mo Ran forced down a mouthful of blood. "Yes, Shizun."

Chu Wanning seemed like he wasn't done doling out beatings yet, but he recognized that Mo Ran had been under the influence of the illusion and shouldn't be blamed for *all* of his actions. He hesitated for a moment but, at length, put the willow vine away. "What happened today…"

Mo Ran rushed to speak before Chu Wanning finished. "No one will know besides you and me! I absolutely won't say anything! Let the heavens strike me with lightning if I speak a word of it!"

Chu Wanning was quiet for a moment, then smiled grimly. "I've heard you take that oath no fewer than a hundred times, and not once did your word count for anything."

"I'm definitely serious this time!" Sure, his body might have reacted, but as far as Mo Ran was concerned, wanting to fuck Chu Wanning was like wanting to eat stinky tofu—neither were sentiments that should be bandied about in public. Just eat your stinky tofu in a corner away from everyone else so they won't have to smell it. The same went for wanting to bed Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran had always loathed Chu Wanning. How could he let anyone know that he loathed him on one hand but secretly wanted to fuck him on the other? If that wasn't crazy, then what was?

As for his sordid business with Chu Wanning in his previous life? Spare him; he really didn't want to even mention it.

"This illusion's influence is strong. Whoever you meet within it takes

on the appearance of the person your heart most wishes to see," Chu Wanning explained as he walked alongside Mo Ran. "To avoid its influence, you must remain calm and stay focused."

"Oh…"

Huh? Wait a second! Mo Ran suddenly thought of something and quivered. If that was the case, then the Shi Mei that he'd met in the illusory realm in his last life might not have been the real Shi Mei either? What if that had also been—

He snuck a sideways glance at Chu Wanning and couldn't help but shudder.

No way! If that had been Chu Wanning he'd kissed in his last lifetime, he definitely would've gotten a good old round of whipping! Or at the very, very least a slap! It couldn't have been Chu Wanning! Definitely not!

In the midst of Mo Ran's internal crisis, Chu Wanning halted and pulled Mo Ran behind him. "Quiet."

"What is it?"

"There's movement ahead."

This incident had unfolded completely differently from how it had in his previous life, so Mo Ran didn't know what to expect anymore. At Chu Wanning's words, he immediately said, "Maybe it's Shi Mei?"

Chu Wanning frowned. "While in this illusory realm, you absolutely must not imagine who you might meet ahead, or else whoever or whatever you meet *will* take on that person's appearance. Remove distractions; focus your thoughts."

Mo Ran tried to do so for a bit, but then realized that he couldn't.

Chu Wanning glanced at him. A dagger of concentrated spiritual energy formed in his hand and jabbed unceremoniously into Mo Ran's arm.

"Ah—!"

"Don't yell." Chu Wanning had anticipated this. His other hand was already touching Mo Ran's lips with a golden light, and Mo Ran suddenly couldn't make a sound. "Does it hurt?"

What do you think?! Why don't you stab yourself, too, and see if it

hurts! Mo Ran nodded pitifully, eyes watering.

"Good. Focus on the pain and don't think about anything else. Follow behind me. Let's go take a look."

Mo Ran silently cursed Chu Wanning as he followed quietly behind him on the winding path. Unexpectedly, they heard the sounds of chatter and laughter as they got closer. In this desolate place? How suspicious…

As the pair turned the corner of a tall, continuous wall, they finally arrived at the place the voices were coming from.

It was a brightly lit manor draped in vibrant red silks that swayed gently in the breeze. Well over one hundred banquet tables stood in the large courtyard of the manor, bearing all manner of exquisite dishes. The courtyard bustled with activity, the guests drinking and making merry. Past the open gates of the main hall was a massive, eye-catching Xi character in bright scarlet. To all appearances, it seemed to be a wedding banquet.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran whispered. "Look at these people… None of them have faces!"

Chapter 13:
This Venerable One's Bride

OF COURSE, Chu Wanning had already noticed that without Mo Ran's comment.

The guests chattered cheerfully, but there was no way to tell where their voices came from. Every single last one of those people sitting, standing, playing party games, and making toasts had a completely blank face, as if they were made of paper.

"What should we do? Don't tell me we should go in there and drink with them."

Chu Wanning didn't laugh at Mo Ran's bad attempt at a joke and focused instead on the matter at hand, his head lowered in thought.

Suddenly, scattered footsteps came from a distance away. Two long lines of people appeared out of the fog, walking in procession as they headed slowly toward the manor.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran moved reflexively to hide behind a large rock in the garden. The lines approached, led by a smiling golden boy and jade maiden.[13] Unusually, the pair had heavily painted facial features, which stood out in sharp relief. In the dim light of the night, they looked just like the little boy and girl paper dolls that people burned for the dead.

Each of them held a red candle, and each candle was as thick around as a child's arm. These candles were decorated with an intertwining dragon and phoenix, and as they burned, they released the strong scent of Butterfly Town's signature perfume. Mo Ran nearly lost his senses to the smell again, but thankfully the dull ache of the wound on his hand where Chu Wanning had stabbed him kept him grounded. He jabbed at the injury again for good measure.

Chu Wanning glanced at him.

"*Ahem*, this is pretty effective." Mo Ran paused. "Shizun, how come you don't need to poke a hole in yourself to maintain your consciousness?"

“The scent has no effect on me.”

“Ah? Why not?”

“My cultivation base is strong,” Chu Wanning said frostily.

Mo Ran fell silent.

Led by the golden boy and jade maiden, the twin lines processed slowly up a flight of steps. Chu Wanning watched them for a while before quietly uttering a quiet sound of surprise. He was rarely ever surprised. Mo Ran curiously followed his gaze, only to be just as surprised himself.

The lines were made up of corpses, who swayed as they walked. They retained their facial features from life, but their eyes were closed, and their skin was deathly pale. Most of them were fairly young, likely below twenty, both male and female, and one silhouette among them looked especially familiar.

The eldest Chen-gongzi, who had been in the coffin earlier, had somehow joined this procession. Eyes closed, he walked slowly in the trail of the strange candle scent. Everyone else in the lines was paired up, but he was different—he wasn’t accompanied by a person, but a ghost bride made of paper.

As if Chen-gongzi’s presence hadn’t been odd enough, when the procession advanced far enough for Mo Ran and Chu Wanning to see the people at the very end of the lines, the color instantly drained from Mo Ran’s face.

Heads hung low, Shi Mei and Madam Chen-Yao followed along at the end of the corpse procession. Their eyes were also closed, their faces pale, and they walked in the exact same manner as the corpses before them. It was impossible to tell if they were still alive.

Mo Ran was about to lose his mind. He leapt up and tried to rush forward but was stopped by Chu Wanning’s grip on his shoulder. “Wait.”

“But Shi Mei—!”

“I know.” Chu Wanning watched the lines slowly advance and spoke quietly. “Don’t be hasty. Look over there—there’s a barrier in place. If you rush over, it’ll sound an alarm. If every faceless ghost in the courtyard attacks at once, things will get out of hand.”

Chu Wanning was a master of barriers; his own were formidable, and his eyes were sharp. Mo Ran looked over and saw that there was indeed a nearly transparent veil at the entrance to the courtyard.

When the golden boy and jade maiden arrived before the courtyard, they blew softly at the candles they were holding to make the flames burn even higher, then slowly stepped through the barrier and into the yard.

One by one, the corpses followed behind them through the barrier without any interference. The faceless people drinking in the courtyard turned to watch them enter and began to cheer and clap.

"Go, follow them," said Chu Wanning. "Close your eyes and don't breathe when you cross the barrier. Copy what the corpses do no matter what happens, and absolutely *do not speak*."

Mo Ran was anxious to save Shi Mei and needed no further urging. He and Chu Wanning slipped into the corpse procession.

Each line had the same number of corpses. Chu Wanning took the place behind Shi Mei so Mo Ran could only line up behind Madam Chen-Yao. The procession moved at an agonizingly slow pace. Mo Ran kept looking at Shi Mei but could only see the side of his pale face and a bit of snow-white neck that drooped helplessly.

When they finally reached the barrier, they both held their breath and passed through without incident. The courtyard was bigger on the inside than it had seemed from without. Aside from the three-story manor decorated with lanterns and colored banners, the left and right ends of the courtyard were also densely packed with at least a hundred small side rooms. Each of these was decorated with a large scarlet Xi character on the window and a red lantern hanging by the door.

There came the sounds of firecrackers and suonas, and the faceless guests stood simultaneously.

A faceless ceremony official appeared before the manor, voice sweeping high and low as he announced, "The auspicious hour is upon us. The brides and grooms have arrived."

Mo Ran was astounded. Huh? These corpses were supposed to be

grooms and brides? He hurriedly looked to Chu Wanning for help, but the Beidou Immortal was lost in his own thoughts, his brows tightly furrowed. He didn't even spare Mo Ran a glance.

Uncle's efforts are sincerely misguided, Mo Ran thought to himself. Going down the mountain to gain practical experience with a teacher who ignored him was doing more harm to his pride than not bringing any teacher along at all.

A group of giggling children darted into the yard, dressed in bright red but with their hair tied in white strings. They swarmed around the two lines of people like so many little fish, each tugging a person toward one of the rooms on either side of the courtyard.

Mo Ran, at a complete loss, mouthed toward Chu Wanning: *Shizun, what do we do?*

Chu Wanning shook his head and pointed toward the corpses in front of them. These followed obediently behind the little boys and girls. His meaning was clear: *Go along with it.*

Left with no choice, Mo Ran could only stumble along, following a little boy with a topknot who led him into one of the rooms. As soon as they entered, the boy waved his arm and the door slammed shut behind them.

Mo Ran stared at the child, wary of what the faceless little ghost was going to do to him. In his last lifetime, Chu Wanning had rescued Shi Mei and broken through the illusory realm all on his own, vanquishing the evil without Mo Ran ever having to lift a finger. Afterward, Mo Ran had been too busy dwelling on the sweet aftertaste of Shi Mei's lips to even pay attention to Chu Wanning's explanation. As such, with the situation unfolding differently, he had no idea what to expect and could only brace himself for whatever might come.

The room came with a dressing table and a copper mirror, as well as a set of intricately embroidered black and red wedding clothes that hung neatly on a rack. The child patted a bench, gesturing for Mo Ran to sit.

Mo Ran concluded that the ghosts here weren't too clever. Rather dumb, actually. As long as he didn't speak, they couldn't even tell the living from the dead. He sat before the dressing table as directed, and the child toddled over to help him wash and change.

Suddenly, a haitang blossom floated in from the window and delicately landed on the water in the wash basin. Mo Ran's eyes brightened. That haitang was named Yuheng of the Night Sky, and it was a technique used specifically by Chu Wanning for silent communication.

He scooped the flower out of the water, and the haitang instantly blossomed and unfurled in his palm to reveal a speck of mellow golden light at its center. He plucked the speck of light between his fingertips and placed it in his ear. Chu Wanning's voice started speaking into it.

"Mo Ran, I used Tianwen to confirm that this illusory realm was indeed created by Butterfly Town's ghost mistress of ceremonies. After receiving the villagers' offerings and incense and worship for hundreds of years, the mistress has managed to cultivate into an actual deity. Every ghost marriage contributes to its power, so it delights in presiding over these ceremonies. The corpses in the lines are likely Butterfly Town's ghost couples from these past couple centuries, whose weddings it witnessed. It likes the merriment, so it calls the corpses back into the illusory realm every night to do it all over again, growing stronger each time."

What a deviant! thought Mo Ran.

If other deities got bored, they might at most play matchmaker with young men and women. But this ghost mistress of ceremonies sure was something else; it might have had the body of a deity, but it must have forgotten to grow a head, if this was the kind of hobby it entertained. Playing matchmaker with corpses! And not even just the once, but summoning them from their graves every night to do it over and over and over again! Were corpse orgies that riveting?

This spinster deity—what a damn headcase.

"Its real body isn't here," said Chu Wanning. "Don't act carelessly now, just follow the golden boy and jade maiden after this. It will have to appear in person to absorb energy from the ghost weddings."

Mo Ran wanted to ask, *What about Shi Mei? Is he okay?*

"There's no need to worry about Shi Mei. He and Mistress Chen are both just temporarily unconscious due to the perfume." Chu Wanning was incredibly thorough and had anticipated everything Mo Ran might ask. "Take care of yourself. I will handle everything."

After that, the voice faded away.

At the same time, the ghost child finished fussing over Mo Ran's outfit. Mo Ran glanced at the mirror to see his own reflection. The man reflected there was handsome, with clear and refreshing facial features, and lips that curved naturally upward at their corners. The collar of the fiery red wedding garment he wore was neatly folded, and his long hair was done up with a white hairband, making him look quite the part of the ghost groom.

The child made a gesture of invitation, and the tightly closed door creaked open.

A line of corpses, male and female both, stood in the corridor, all dressed in wedding clothes. It looked like this ghost mistress of ceremonies and its mud for brains didn't really understand the way of things and had just grabbed any random pair to perform the wedding ceremony, not caring in the least if the couple was male and female, male and male, or female and female.

There was only one line of corpses in this corridor; the other line was across the courtyard on the other side, too far away for Mo Ran to see if Chu Wanning and Shi Mei had come out yet.

The line moved slowly forward. Now and again, he heard the ceremony official's voice from the manor as, one by one, the pairs completed the marriage ceremonies.

Mo Ran looked at Madam Chen-Yao standing in front of him and felt that something wasn't quite right. He puzzled over it for a long while, the line growing shorter and shorter the whole time. Only when the last few pairs were left did this dumb scoundrel *finally* figure it out.

Ah! With the lines in this order, didn't that mean the woman in front of him was gonna get married to Shi Mei? And wouldn't he himself get matched with that wretch, Chu Wanning? Unacceptable!

This ex-Emperor of the Mortal Realm instantly grew upset. Lips pulling downward, he unceremoniously yanked Madam Chen-Yao back and jumped the line to stand in front of her.

The child next to him was flabbergasted, but Mo Ran swiftly lowered his head and made like a hanged ghost, drooping along with the other corpses. Neither the golden boy nor the jade maiden's cultivation was terribly

high; they were baffled for a bit but couldn't even figure out where the problem had occurred. And so, like a pair of dimwits, they ended up doing absolutely nothing about it.

Mo Ran was quite pleased with himself and followed the line cheerfully as he waited to meet up with Shi Mei.

At the same time, Chu Wanning was looking at Shi Mei standing in front of him. There was no way to tell what dangers might lie ahead.

He'd always had a soft heart behind his sharp words. Despite how much he was resented for his harshness, in truth, as long as he was present, he would not allow his disciples to be put in danger. Thus, he also reached out and pulled the befuddled Shi Mei behind himself, switching their places.

His turn arrived.

At the end of the corridor, an attendant stood holding a black and red tray. It giggled as Chu Wanning approached, and the tinkling of a young woman's voice came from that blank, featureless face. "Congratulations, my lady. Felicitations, my lady. May your first meeting be as soulmates. May your happiness be everlasting."

Chu Wanning's face instantly darkened. *L-lady…?! Do you not have eyes?*

When he took another look at the ghost attendant's blank face, he restrained himself. It did not, in fact, have any fucking eyes.

The ghost attendant continued giggling as it lifted the red veil in the tray and covered Chu Wanning's face. Then its ice-cold hand reached over and gripped him lightly with a delicate laugh. "My lady, this way, please."

Chapter 14:
This Venerable One Gets Married

CHU WANNING could see past the thin red veil hanging before his eyes, but the view was somewhat hazy. He kept his face composed behind this veil as he let the ghost attendant lead him to the reception pavilion.

But when Chu Wanning looked up through the haze of red at the person standing across from him, the temperature around him instantly dropped by several degrees.

Mo Ran was also stunned. No, but…shouldn't it have been Shi Mei?

A veil covered the face of the "bride" standing before him, who was decked out in splendid red. He couldn't clearly see the face behind the veil, but no matter how he looked at it, it was definitely Chu Wanning's handsome but icy face currently glaring at him with an air of displeasure and full killing intent.

Mo Ran was stupefied at first. Then his expression began to grow increasingly complicated. All kinds of emotions flashed across his face before finally settling into a strange kind of silence as he stood face-to-face with Chu Wanning, both of them staring uneasily at each other.

It was then that the golden boy and jade maiden behind them giggled and clapped, and then started to sing.

"Oh luminous tide, oh sparkling waves

The waters of the great White Emperor

Upon which blossom-bearing mandarins

Come forth with flower'd beaks to greet two souls

To join them within this coffin dark

Entwined to lie within the sacred hull

Intent once sealed within the beating heart

Now known by death and all it has revealed

Henceforth these two shall pass beneath heaven

Henceforth in death their souls shall never part.”

However, beneath the ghastly verse ran an undercurrent of sadness and regret.

If Mo Ran could speak, he would’ve wanted to say only one thing: “Ugh.”

But he couldn’t speak.

There was a pair of paper dolls before the altar, one male, one female. They had no faces but were lavishly and luxuriously dressed, probably to represent the parents of the ghost couples.

The ceremony official began to chant in a sonorous bellow. “The amorous new bride shies from words and glances tenderly from beneath lowered lashes; red silk shrouds a delicate smile; would the husband please lift the veil.”

Mo Ran had originally been completely unwilling to follow through, but upon hearing these words, he nearly lost his mind trying to hold back his laughter.

Ha ha ha ha! “The amorous new bride shies from words”—aha ha ha ha!

Chu Wanning’s face was ashen as he tried to suppress his anger, and he closed his eyes as if that would shut off his hearing too.

The ghost attendant giggled and handed Mo Ran a folding fan to indicate that this marriage would go well; the words for “fan” and “virtuous” were pronounced the same way.

“Bridegroom, please lift the veil.”

Mo Ran stifled his laughter and followed the instruction, using the fan to lift the silken veil hanging before Chu Wanning’s eyes. Even his eyelashes quivered with suppressed laughter as he peeked at the look stirring upon Chu Wanning’s face.

Seeming to have sensed his mocking gaze, Chu Wanning tried to

endure it for a while but ultimately failed. Fire and lightning danced in his eyes as they snapped open with a murderous aura.

But paired with the red veil clinging to his hair and the scarlet garment adorning his body, although he looked no less fierce, the slight hint of red at the corners of his eyes, born from his anger and grievance, unexpectedly painted quite a uniquely enticing picture.

Faced with eyes like these, Mo Ran startled involuntarily, smile freezing on his lips. Right at that moment, the shizun before him looked just as he had at a certain moment in his past life. The two images overlapped in his vision, and he suddenly couldn't tell *when* he was.

It was only for an instant, but it was enough to drench Mo Ran in cold sweat.

He had once committed three ruthless acts against Chu Wanning:

First: Murder. He had used a killing technique on Chu Wanning.

Second: Humiliation. He had forced Chu Wanning to sate his carnal desires.

Third: …

The third had been the most gratifying thing he'd done in his previous life, but after all was said and done, it had also been his greatest regret.

Of course, the Emperor of the Mortal Realm would never admit to regretting any of his actions, but he had never managed to escape the torment deep in his heart.

Damn. Why was he reminiscing about that insane past? Why did he even remember the Chu Wanning from those days?

Mo Ran shook his head and bit his lips, doing his damnedest to erase Chu Wanning's face from his memories in order to look on the person before him now with fresh eyes.

Chu Wanning was still glaring at him with an "I'm going to kill you" kind of gaze. Mo Ran didn't want to provoke this difficult person further, so he could only smile apologetically with a helpless expression.

The ceremony official spoke, "Groom and bride, perform the cleansing rite."

The cleansing rite dictated that the newlyweds had to first wash themselves individually, then wash each other's hands. The ghost attendant brought out a porcelain pot filled with clear water, lifting it in invitation for the pair to wash their hands. The poured water flowed into a basin underneath.

Chu Wanning's face was full of loathing at the idea of having to wash

himself and then his counterpart. Mo Ran was absentminded and silently washed Chu Wanning's hands without making a fuss, but Chu Wanning was ill-tempered and unceremoniously poured the entire pot on Mo Ran, drenching half his sleeve.

Mo Ran stared at his drenched sleeve for a while, thoughts wandering. Though his face hardly showed any reaction, a faint light drifted across the depths of his ink-black eyes. His heart beat wildly as he thought*, Chu Wanning hasn't changed. He's never changed.*

His every action, every thought, in the last life and this, all of it was exactly the same, not the slightest bit different…

He raised his head slowly, and for an instant, it felt as if he was back at Sisheng Peak, standing before Wushan Palace as Chu Wanning walked toward him up a long stretch of stairs. In the next moment, he would kneel before Mo Ran; that proud head would touch the ground, that upright spine would bend, and Chu Wanning would prostrate himself at Mo Ran's feet for a long, long time.

"Cleansing rite complete."

The ghost attendant's abrupt chant roused Mo Ran from his memories.

As he came to, his eyes met Chu Wanning's, whose pitch-black pupils flashed with a cold light like the reflection of a sword. He looked quite terrifying.

Uh, the past life was the past life!

As for something like making Chu Wanning kneel before him, he would have to make do with just thinking about it in this life, because the cost of making it happen would truly be too great…

After the cleansing rite was the meat-sharing rite, then the winecup-crossing rite.

The ghost attendant chanted slowly, "Husband and wife share a cup of wine; henceforth united until the end of the world."

Wine cups were exchanged in the winecup-crossing rite, and after that was the ritual bowing to heaven and earth.

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes narrowed dangerously; he looked like he was so angry that he really was about to lose it. When this was over, Mo Ran

wouldn't have been surprised if he chopped the ghost mistress of ceremonies back into muddy clay at the very least.

But he really couldn't look too closely at Chu Wanning when he was like this. Even a single extra glance and he risked falling back into those chaotic, filthy memories, from which he would be unable to free himself.

"First, bow to heaven and earth."

Mo Ran thought that even if they were playing along, Chu Wanning was definitely too proud to actually kneel. But unexpectedly, in order to finish what he had started, Chu Wanning closed his eyes, his brows twitching, and actually knelt down. Together, the pair touched their brows to the ground.

"Second, bow to parents."

Fine then, kneeling for the faceless paper dolls. Could those even be called one's parents?

"Third bow, husband and wife to each other."

Chu Wanning's thick eyelashes were lowered as he turned and knelt directly and swiftly without so much as sparing Mo Ran a single glance, but his teeth were tightly clenched.

Who could've guessed that the pair would have such poor coordination and would kneel a bit too close? As they bowed, their heads knocked together with a *thud*.

Chu Wanning sucked in a breath from the pain. He held his forehead and raised teary eyes to glare vengefully at Mo Weiyu, who was also rubbing his forehead.

Mo Ran could only mouth soundlessly, *Sorry.*

Chu Wanning didn't speak, face gloomy, and rolled his eyes.

After that was the jiefa rite, where the ceremony official chanted, "Entwining their hair, new husband and wife / Ensure their love shall ne'er be unwound."

The ghost attendant offered a pair of golden scissors, and Mo Ran couldn't help but flinch, worried that in his displeasure, Chu Wanning might just stab him to death. The thought indeed seemed to cross Chu Wanning's

mind, but in the end, they each only cut a lock of hair from the other. The locks were placed in a brocade pouch that the golden boy and jade maiden presented to the "bride," Chu Wanning, for him to keep.

Mo Ran really wanted to ask: *I know you're pissed, but you wouldn't use my hair to curse me or make a voodoo doll or something, right?*

The ceremony official chanted, "Ceremony complete."

They both sighed in relief and stood. But unexpectedly, the ceremony official continued,

"The auspicious hour has arrived. Enter the bridal chamber."

What. The. Hell! Mo Ran froze instantly—and nearly spat out a mouthful of blood!

What kinda joke was this?! If he dared to consummate anything with Chu Wanning, this wedding really would become a fucking ghost wedding! Sure, the saying went that it would be romantic to die beneath peony flowers and beauties alike, but in this lifetime he wanted—no, wait, in *both* lifetimes he wanted the virtuous Shi Mei, not this cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning, who would tie up anyone who coveted him and toss them into a mud pond!

Was it too late to flee this marriage?

Chapter 15:
This Venerable One's First Time Seeing *This* Kind of Wedding Night Unveiling

SOMETHING LIKE FLEEING this wedding was obviously just wishful thinking. Shi Mei was still there, so no matter what, Mo Ran couldn't just leave.

This damned ghost mistress of ceremonies, though—wasn't it a little too fucking diligent?

Mo Ran was pale, both from anger and from the effort it took to restrain himself. *Isn't it enough to just oversee the wedding rites?* he grumbled to himself. *How is the wedding night any of your fucking business? Besides! They're all corpses here! Rigor mortis! How the fuck would their wedding nights even* work*?!*

As for what Chu Wanning's face looked like right now, Mo Ran was too scared to even glance. He got busy playing dumb, his eyes glued to the carpet. He *really* wanted to grab that ghost mistress of ceremonies, wherever it might be hiding, and roar in its face, *Fuck! You! You son of a bitch! You show me how it's done, then!*

The golden boy and jade maiden crowded around them, shoving them toward the back of the hall. A coffin lay there, painted a bright scarlet. It was humongous, twice the size of a normal casket, and looked exactly like the one they'd dug up before.

Chu Wanning murmured something under his breath in understanding. Not long after, Mo Ran also figured it out and let out a huge sigh of relief. Of course dead people couldn't have an actual wedding night. This so-called "wedding night" probably just meant being sealed into the same coffin for joint interment, to be "together in death."

The golden boy and jade maiden confirmed their suspicions. "Would the bride please enter the bridal chamber first."

Chu Wanning straightened out his wide sleeves and lay inside with a frosty look.

“Next, would the groom please enter the bridal chamber.”

Mo Ran grabbed the edge of the coffin and paused, blinking. Chu Wanning had already occupied more than half the space inside. The coffin was spacious, but it was a bit of a squeeze for two men. He climbed into it and was inevitably forced to lay down on top of Chu Wanning’s spread-out clothing, drawing an irate glare from the other man.

The golden boy and jade maiden circled the coffin and began to sing the same eerie yet sorrowful elegy as before.

“Oh luminous tide, oh sparkling waves

The waters of the great White Emperor

Upon which blossom-bearing mandarins

Come forth with flower’d beaks to greet two souls

To join them within this coffin dark

Entwined to lie within the sacred hull

Intent once sealed within the beating heart

Now known by death and all it has revealed

Henceforth these two shall pass beneath heaven

Henceforth in death their souls shall never part.”

Song finished, the children stood, one to the left and one to the right, and slowly pushed the coffin lid into place. With a dull rumble, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were soon surrounded by complete darkness as they were sealed inside.

The coffin’s walls were so thick that they could speak quietly without being heard outside, but Chu Wanning raised his hand and erected a soundproofing barrier to ensure that they definitely wouldn’t be detected. Having done that, the first thing he said was:

“Move over. You’re on my arm.”

Mo Ran stared in silence. Weren’t there more pressing matters to

discuss than someone being on someone else's arm? Despite grousing to himself, Mo Ran scooted over.

"Move over more. There's no room for my legs."

More scooting.

"Move more! You're right next to my face!"

"Shizun, I'm up against the side already, what else do you want?" Mo Ran whined, aggrieved.

Chu Wanning finally hmphed and went silent.

Mo Ran was crammed into the corner for a while before the coffin shook, lifted by people outside. These people started slowly moving in some unknown direction, the coffin rocking with their every step. Mo Ran strained to listen to the sounds outside as he seethed, thinking about how Shi Mei was probably trapped in a coffin with Madam Chen-Yao at this very moment. But there was nothing he could do about it.

Chu Wanning's barrier was incredible; it prevented sounds inside the coffin from getting out while allowing sounds from outside to pass through. They could hear firecrackers and suonas through the casket's sides.

"This gaggle of ghosts and demons sure are bored," said Mo Ran. "Just where are they taking these coffins?"

It was too dark inside the coffin to see Chu Wanning's face, so he could only hear his voice. "It's just like Butterfly Town's traditions; the destination should be the temple outside town."

Mo Ran nodded and concentrated on listening for a while. "Shizun, there seem to be more and more footsteps outside."

"Ghosts travel at night. All of the coffins will be carried over together. If my guess is right, the ghost mistress of ceremonies will appear in its true form at the temple to draw 'merits'[14] from the newlywed couples."

"Won't people notice hundreds of coffins being carried through town?" Mo Ran asked.

"They will not," Chu Wanning answered. "The coffins are carried by ghost golden boys and jade maidens. Ordinary people can't see objects carried by ghosts."

“How are you so sure about that?”

“I used Tianwen to interrogate one of the ghost golden boys in the dressing room earlier.”

They were silent for a while before Mo Ran asked, “What was the deal with that red coffin on the mountain then, the one with Chen-gongzi in it? And why do people keep dying in the Chen family?”

“Not sure,” said Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran was slightly surprised. “The ghost golden boy didn’t tell you?”

“The ghost golden boy said it also didn’t know.”

It was quiet again for a bit.

Then Chu Wanning spoke. “But I think that family is hiding something from us.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Remember, although the thing enshrined in that temple exudes evil energy, it’s still a being that has cultivated into a deity. It depends on the people’s worship to grow stronger.”

Mo Ran had never paid attention to Chu Wanning’s lessons in his previous life and thus had ended up not having a lot of the basic general knowledge he’d needed to handle certain matters later on. He thought that perhaps he should try to be more modest and seek some instruction in this life reborn, and so he asked, “What’s so significant about deities?”

“What were you doing during last month’s lesson on the differences between deities, ghosts, gods, and demons?”

This venerable one was just reborn, Mo Ran thought. *Of course this venerable one wouldn’t remember what he was doing during some lesson from more than ten years ago!*

But he’d probably either been picking at his feet under the table, reading *Bedroom Adventures of Nine Dragons and a Phoenix*, ogling Shi Mei while lost in thought, or staring at Chu Wanning’s neck while secretly gesturing various ways of cutting a person’s head off.

“As punishment, copy *Record of Knowledge from the Six Kingdoms* ten times when we return,” Chu Wanning said stonily.

“Oh…” All those times Mo Ran had skipped class had come back to bite him in the ass.

“Deities differ from gods. Gods can act as they please, but deities cannot meddle in mortal affairs without being beseeched to do so.”

A shiver ran down Mo Ran’s spine. “Which means that this ghost mistress killed the members of the Chen family at the behest of a person?”

In the darkness, Chu Wanning’s voice sounded terribly ominous. “The beseecher was not necessarily a living person.”

Mo Ran opened his mouth to ask more questions, but before he could, the coffin shook abruptly and tilted to the left, perhaps because the golden boy and jade maiden carrying the coffin had come to a hill or some such.

With the unexpected jolt, the smoothness of the coffin’s interior, and the complete lack of anything to grab on to, Mo Ran tumbled over and smacked firmly into his shizun’s chest.

“Ungh…”

Mo Ran put a hand over his aching nose and lifted his head, disoriented, just as the faint fragrance of haitang flowers reached his nose. The scent was as light as the fog at dawn, with a hint of a nighttime chill. Such scents ordinarily lulled people into a haze, but this one was clean and refreshing, and instead cleared the head.

Mo Ran froze, then instantly became hard.

This was a fragrance with which he was all too familiar. It was Chu Wanning’s scent.

But to Mo Ran, this scent had always been intertwined with desire.

All of a sudden, a certain deep-seated depravity, like a lightning-stricken forest fire, shot directly into his head.

Chapter 16:
This Venerable One Is Stunned

MO RAN REALLY couldn't be blamed for being so bestial. Trapped in a tight space with someone you'd gone to bed with countless times—regardless of whether it was heartfelt or feigned, out of revenge or fondness—and inhaling their familiar scent… Anyone's thoughts would waver in a situation like that.

Besides, Mo Ran was a reprobate to begin with.

Shi Mei was his moonlight. Mo Ran didn't have the heart to touch him; he couldn't risk ruining him. But he had no such qualms about wrecking Chu Wanning. Upon Chu Wanning, he could without restraint vent all of his immoralities, feral desires, and bone-deep savagery.

He could grind this person into dust, pin him down, tear him apart, run him through, subject him to everything that he would never even think of doing to Shi Mei.

In the past life, every time he'd seen Chu Wanning with his head thrown back, neck bared and the jut of his throat bobbing, Mo Ran had felt like he might lose himself and turn into a bloodthirsty beast, had been consumed by his desire to rip open Chu Wanning's throat, guzzle his blood, crush his bones.

He didn't care for Chu Wanning, and so he held nothing back.

Eventually, Mo Ran's body had even developed an ingrained response from all the defiling he had done. A mere whiff of Chu Wanning's scent would light a fire in his abdomen and make his heart itch—make him want to tie Chu Wanning down to a bed to fuck.

In the silence of the coffin, Mo Ran's frenzied heartbeats were audible. He knew that Chu Wanning's face was somewhere close because he could feel his breaths. If he were to lunge forward with a bite now, Chu Wanning would be unable to get away. But…

Never mind.

Mo Ran shuffled backward, away from Chu Wanning—though not without much difficulty, as the coffin really was cramped.

"Sorry about that, Shizun." Mo Ran laughed awkwardly. "Didn't expect the coffin to sha—ake!"

As he was speaking, the coffin tilted again. Mo Ran rolled into Chu Wanning's arms once more.

Chu Wanning did not deign to respond.

Mo Ran shuffled backward a second time, and again, the coffin lurched. This repeated over and over.

"Did I get cursed or what?" Mo Ran scurried back yet again.

The golden boy and jade maiden were probably going up a slope. It was too slippery inside the coffin, and before long, Mo Ran once more rolled helplessly into Chu Wanning.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran bit his lip, putting on a pitiful air. This fellow had been born with endearing looks; if he put his mind to it, he could hide his wolf tail and put on a convincing puppy dog act.

Chu Wanning said nothing.

Mo Ran really didn't want to get rolled around anymore, so he simply gave up fighting it altogether. "I'm really not doing it on purpose."

Still nothing.

"The wounds on my back hurt from hitting the wall…" Mo Ran continued in a small voice.

In the darkness, Chu Wanning seemed to sigh softly, though with the incessantly loud gongs and drums outside, Mo Ran couldn't be sure if he'd heard right.

But in the next moment, the scent of haitang flowers grew stronger as Chu Wanning placed his hand behind Mo Ran's back, blocking the gap so that Mo Ran wouldn't bump into it again.

It wasn't quite a hug—Chu Wanning held his arm at a distance and made sure not to make contact with Mo Ran's body, other than his clothes draping over him—but the position was still a bit intimate.

"Be careful. Don't hit it again." Chu Wanning's voice was deep, like

porcelain submerged in a creek, steady and dignified. It would have been a striking voice to listen to, if one weren't listening to it through a shroud of hatred.

"Mn."

No one spoke after that.

Mo Ran was a growing teenager at this time, and he wasn't as tall as he would be as an adult. At present, in Chu Wanning's arms, his forehead only reached Chu Wanning's chin.

This feeling was awfully familiar, yet also awfully unfamiliar. The familiar part was the person lying beside him. The unfamiliar part was the position in which they lay.

In their previous lifetime, not so long ago, it had always been Mo Ran lying in Sisheng Peak's Wushan Palace, a lonesome Taxian-jun with no one left to turn to, in a darkness so endless that he could hardly breathe, clutching Chu Wanning tightly in his arms.

By then, he'd physically outgrown Chu Wanning and was also stronger than his shizun. His arms were like clamps, like shackles, latching on to the remaining bit of warmth in his arms, as if holding on to the very last ember of fire in the world.

He would lower his head to kiss Chu Wanning's inky black hair, then lean in close, insatiable, and burrow his face into the crook of Chu Wanning's neck to ruthlessly bite and gnaw.

"I hate you, Chu Wanning. I really hate you so much."

His voice was a little hoarse.

"But you're all I have left."

Mo Ran was none too gently jolted out of his memories by a series of crashes and bumps. The sound of gongs and drums stopped abruptly, and a deathly silence settled over everything.

"Shizun…"

Chu Wanning reached out and pressed a finger to his lips, cautioning him in a low voice. "Don't talk. We're here."

Sure enough, there were no more footsteps outside, only silence.

Chu Wanning's fingertip lit up with a faint golden light. A quick slash on the coffin wall and a narrow gap was cut open, just enough for them to peek outside.

They had indeed been brought to the outskirts of Butterfly Town. The front of the temple was densely cluttered with coffins. The heavy scent of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air grew heavier still as it drifted through the opening into the coffin.

Mo Ran suddenly realized that something was off. "Shizun, does it seem like this scent—and the one in the illusory realm—aren't quite the same as the scent in Chen-gongzi's coffin?"

"How so?"

Mo Ran had a keen sense of smell. "Back at the northern mountain, when the coffin first split open, the scent that drifted out was pleasant and didn't cause me any discomfort; that one was almost certainly the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance. But ever since we entered the illusory realm, I've felt like the smell, although similar, is somewhat different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but now…I think I know what it is."

Chu Wanning turned to look at him. "You dislike this smell?"

Mo Ran remained pressed against the opening, peering outside. "Mn. I've hated the smell of incense ever since I was little. The scent here and in the illusory realm aren't Hundred Butterfly Fragrance at all, but the scent of the special incense that the people of Butterfly Town burn for the ghost mistress of ceremonies. Look over there."

Chu Wanning followed Mo Ran's gaze and saw three incense sticks, each as thick as a child's arm, standing in the incense burner in front of the temple. Their scent diffused leisurely into the air.

The people of Butterfly Town made all kinds of scented products using flowers, and even their incense was locally produced. Since everything was made from the flowers grown around town, the resulting scents were quite similar to people unfamiliar with the art.

"Could it be that the scent in Chen-gongzi's coffin actually has nothing to do with the one in the illusion?" Chu Wanning pondered aloud.

Before he could finish mulling over this new detail, his thoughts were

interrupted by a piercing red light from within the temple. They both looked in that direction to see the light shining resplendent, illuminating the whole area. A row of red lotus lamps, used for making wishes, sat on a stand at the side of the temple. One by one, they lit up.

The ghost children escorting the coffins all knelt at once, chanting, "Mistress of Ceremonies descending, pray guide these lonely souls to escape suffering and find mates so that they may be joined in burial, partnered in the afterlife."

The statue of the ghost mistress of ceremonies inside the temple emitted a holy golden light amidst the thundering chant. Then its eyelids lowered, the corners of its lips moved slowly, and it leapt gracefully from the altar.

Graceful movement. Poised bearing.

Unfortunately, the body, made of clay, was much too heavy. The young maiden landed with a *thud*, smashing a huge crater into the ground.

Mo Ran snorted. "Pfft."

Chu Wanning only stared.

The ghost mistress seemed quite dissatisfied with its weight. It stared at the crater for quite a while before stepping out with slow, deliberate steps as it rearranged its clothing.

Its appearance was that of a maiden draped in rich reds, its face painted with makeup and a strand of cypress in its hair. The overall look was quite festive. In the darkness of night, it turned its neck one way, then the other, and came to a stop in front of the hundred coffins. The breeze was suffused with the stench of corpse rot. The ghost mistress's mood seemed to improve, and it slowly spread out its arms, letting out a croaking sort of laughter.

"All who believe in and worship me shall be granted a partner in marriage to fulfill that which they were denied in life." The delicate voice drifted in the night, and the ghosts and monsters began to prostrate themselves in gratitude.

"Mistress of Ceremonies, please impart your blessings!"

"Mistress of Ceremonies, pray bestow marriage upon them!"

Such pleas came wave after wave. The ghost mistress seemed

delighted as it weaved slowly between the rows of coffins, dragging its long, scarlet-painted nails along their sides, the shrill sound ear-piercing.

"Shizun, I remember you mentioning before that monsters, deities, ghosts, gods, demons, and humans each occupy their own realms. Why is this deity hanging out with the ghosts down here instead of living it up in the ninth heaven upstairs?" Mo Ran wondered.

"Because it is in charge of ghost marriages and is sustained by the worship of ghosts," Chu Wanning replied. "The ghosts must provide it with immense merits, or it wouldn't have been able to cultivate into a deity in a mere few hundred years. With such an advantageous arrangement, it's naturally glad to keep the company of these underworld 'friends.'"

The ghost mistress circled the cluster of coffins and returned to the front, at which point its delicate voice rang out once again. "A marriage shall be bestowed upon each coffin opened. Start from the left."

Following its command, the first coffin on the left slowly opened, a golden boy and jade maiden bowing respectfully by its side. The corpses within climbed out unsteadily, their faces looking even more deathly pale against the vibrant red of their wedding garments. The couple slowly made their way before the ghost mistress and knelt.

The ghost mistress put its hand between them and spoke. "As the mistress of ceremonies, I hereby confer upon thee a posthumous marriage. Henceforth you are husband and wife, male and female joyous in the joining."

Mo Ran rolled his eyes and muttered, "Don't wax poetic if you don't know how to. These wedding vows sound obscene."

"You have quite the indecent imagination," Chu Wanning said coldly.

Mo Ran shut up.

But before long, the ghost mistress promptly demonstrated that, in fact, the indecent one here was not Mo Ran but this deity in charge of ghost marriages.

It was as if the pair of newlywed corpses had consumed aphrodisiacs. They were clearly already dead, yet they tore at each other's clothing, kissing and embracing in a frenzied tangle right then and there, shamelessly out in

the open in front of everyone.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were left speechless.

“As the Mistress of Ceremonies, I hereby grant thee the joys of the natural order. Yin and yang may mate, regardless of life or death!”

The ghost mistress’s shrieking grew increasingly shrill and haughty. The corpses’ movements also grew increasingly exaggerated. The male corpse divested himself of clothing and was ridiculously vigorous, no different from a live person.

Mo Ran was totally stunned. “You can’t just…fucking…do that!”

Chapter 17:
This Venerable One's Shizun Got Injured; This Venerable One Really…

WHAT IS THIS GHOST MISTRESS even doing, being a mistress of ceremonies?! Change your career and sell aphrodisiacs instead!

Other people's aphrodisiacs could at best maybe make a wilted living person show off some male prowess, but these gods and deities were really something else. A slight wave of the hand and even a dead person could get it up—how miraculous!

Just as Mo Ran was really getting into the show, Chu Wanning suddenly reached out and covered his ears.

"Eh?" said Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning's expression was frozen over. "Don't look at such obscenity."

"But why are you covering my ears instead of my eyes?"

"Don't look *or* listen," Chu Wanning said tonelessly. "You can close your eyes yourself."

"Pfft. Shizun, you're really…" Mo Ran snorted. *Take a look at your own blushing face. Even your* ears *are red. You're clearly the one who should be closing their eyes here.*

Mo Ran couldn't help his amusement. Chu Wanning, who was as frigid as ice and snow and had never seen so much as a single erotic painting… Having to witness a coupling at such close quarters now might just make the man choke to death.

The dead couple almost seemed to come alive as they screwed. Even their stiff throats, which shouldn't have been able to produce any noise at all, somehow started making lifelike moaning and panting sounds.

Chu Wanning jerked his face away from the sight, too disgusted to continue watching. Mo Ran's amusement only grew. With a mischievous grin and full teasing intention, he reached out to turn Chu Wanning's face

back.

Chu Wanning flinched away as if stung. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing whatsoever.” Mo Ran’s voice was honey-sweet with a hint of mockery as he looked at him. *Aren’t you too old to be turning red at this kind of thing?*

Oh, wait. It was more like Chu Wanning’s face was turning green and red at the same time. Pretty hilarious, actually.

“Shizun, don’t you teach us to always assess the opponent’s capabilities before engaging them? You have to at least look to take the measure of the ghost mistress’s capabilities.”

“What’s there to see? I’m not looking.”

Mo Ran sighed. “How is your face this thin?”

“Filth and debauchery are harmful to the eyes!” Chu Wanning shot back.

“Guess I’ll have to look, then.” Mo Ran lay there cheekily, peering outside and providing a running commentary of “ah,” “wow,” “awesome,” “aiyo,” and so on.

Chu Wanning was so furious he was about to explode, and he hissed in a low voice, “Look if you want, but don’t talk!”

Mo Ran played innocent. “I thought you’d want to know.”

Chu Wanning finally couldn’t take it anymore. Gripping Mo Ran by the neck, he said through gritted teeth, “If you make *one* more sound, I will throw you out there to feed the zombies!”

Okay, enough was enough. You really couldn’t push Chu Wanning too far unless you wanted a full course from Tianwen, and so Mo Ran showed some discipline and obediently lay there watching without a sound.

As the ghost couple’s pleasure peaked, the male corpse let out a low roar and spasmed on top of the female corpse. A wisp of green smoke rose from their bodies, and the ghost mistress opened its mouth, greedily sucking the wisp down until every last tendril of smoke was consumed. It wiped the corner of its mouth with satisfaction, eyes shining.

That would be the “merit” from the ghost marriage couples that

increased its cultivation.

"Ha ha, ha ha ha!" Having had a taste, the ghost mistress seemed more radiant, and its beaming smile intensified. When it spoke again, its faint, drifting voice had become much clearer; it shouted, bellowed, sharp voice resounding as if it could rip through the endless night. "Get up! Get up! All you single men and unwed women! I grant you the blessings of intimacy! You shall provide me worship in return! Up! Up! All of you, up!"

Mo Ran's heart thumped. *Shit…*

What was it planning to do?!

The simultaneous shaking of the hundreds of coffins around them confirmed Mo Ran's worst fears. The ghost mistress was going to call on the couples in all the coffins to screw so that it could devour all their merits at once.

This was no joking matter. Mo Ran pulled at Chu Wanning. "Shizun!"

"What is it this time?!"

"Hurry! We have to get out there! Shi Mei is trapped with that Chen woman!" Mo Ran was beside himself with panic. "We have to hurry and save him!"

Chu Wanning glanced outside. Who would've thought the ghost mistress would have such an appetite, skipping individual pairings to gobble up everything at once!

The neighboring coffins shook more and more violently as the ghost marriage couples inside were compelled to do the deed. Chu Wanning choked at the thought, color draining from his face even more than it already had.

Just then, the beaming ghost mistress seemed to sense something. Its head abruptly twisted, and a pair of pure-black, pupil-less eyes passed over all the rest to stare directly at Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's coffin.

The ghost mistress might not have been smart, but it could feel the absence of familiar venereal energy from that coffin.

There was no worship within that coffin. There was no…

They were alive!

Rearing up, the ghost mistress charged forward, shrieking, clothing a flurry behind it—and a pair of bloodred, razor-sharp claws pierced directly through the wood and into the coffin.

The attack was too sudden. Mo Ran had no time to dodge or defend. Besides, there was hardly any room for movement inside the coffin to start with. Just as those bony claws were about to add five new holes to his head, he was shoved lower. Chu Wanning had swiftly gathered Mo Ran into his arms and covered him with his own body. The ghost mistress's five claws sunk viciously into Chu Wanning's shoulder.

Deep into the bone.

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Chu Wanning bore through it without crying out, letting out only a muted groan. His uninjured hand glowed with a silencing spell as he pressed a finger to Mo Ran's lips, blocking off the sound that he was about to make.

The ghost mistress's claws dug into Chu Wanning's flesh, scratching and tearing. It had clay for a head, and it only knew how to distinguish between the living and the dead by sound. Somehow, in this terrible situation, Chu Wanning managed not to make a single peep even as blood poured from his shoulder. Mo Ran couldn't see the injury from where he was pressed against Chu Wanning's chest, but he could clearly feel Chu Wanning shivering.

Alive…or dead? There was no way a living person would fail to make a sound after this treatment. The ghost mistress couldn't make sense of things, and her claws in Chu Wanning's shoulder continued to brutally dig and tear.

Chu Wanning trembled from the pain, shuddering, his robes drenched in cold sweat. Still he did not falter. He bit down on his lips as he protected the disciple in his arms, as if he had really become a corpse, and blocked the opening in the coffin like forged metal.

At last, the ghost mistress was finally satisfied that the people inside the coffin couldn't possibly be alive and abruptly retracted its claws. Blood splattered, accompanied by the hair-raising, sickeningly sticky sound of claws sliding against flesh and bone.

All at once, the strength drained out of Chu Wanning's tense body. He let go of Mo Ran, panting quietly. The scent of blood inside the coffin was suffocating.

Mo Ran lifted his head. By the dim light streaming through the holes, he could see Chu Wanning's lowered eyelashes, and beneath them, unshed tears in those silent, stubborn eyes. Those phoenix eyes were blurred with pain, but beneath the layer of tears, his gaze was fierce and headstrong…

Mo Ran wanted to talk, but Chu Wanning shook his head and maintained the silencing spell on his lips. A while passed before he let out a slow breath and wrote on the back of Mo Ran's hand with a shaky fingertip: *The barrier has been breached. Do not speak.*

Outside, the ghost mistress tilted its head, confused as to why it

couldn't sense any worship from the people within the coffin—who clearly had to be dead, yet were somehow refusing to follow its commands.

Chu Wanning raised his head to see the ghost mistress through the crack, a golden light enveloping his uninjured hand as a willow vine appeared, fiery light flowing through it. He narrowed his eyes, Tianwen in hand.

And in the next moment he burst out from the coffin.

The casket split apart, and Chu Wanning flew up like lightning. Tianwen lashed out with perfect accuracy to wrap around the ghost mistress's neck as it let out an ear-piercing screech—

"Who are you?! How dare you!"

Chu Wanning's answer was one word: "Scram!"

Crimson wedding robes flowed in the air like waves of clouds. He had endured everything to make this one hit count, and Tianwen wrung with savage brutality, directly snapping the ghost mistress's neck.

A dense red mist mixed with a strange, perfumed scent welled out from the entity's severed neck. Chu Wanning drew back rapidly to avoid it, calling out, "Mo Ran! Thousand Strikes!"

Mo Ran was waiting at the ready. At the command, he channeled spiritual energy into the hidden blade in his sleeve and directed the strike at the ghost mistress's body, which was groping around for its head.

The body of clay cracked open, revealing within it the ghost mistress's true body, translucent and radiating a red light. Chu Wanning raised Tianwen again and ripped the ghost mistress's celestial spirit right out of it.

A scream came from within that headless body. "How dare you! How dare you! Get up! Get up! Kill them! Kill them!"

The originally featureless faces of the golden boys and jade maidens were suddenly illuminated with bloodred eyes. Hundreds of them shrieked as they charged toward Mo Ran and Chu Wanning.

The coffins on the ground also shattered, one after another, the corpses inside rising and rushing to join the fray. Mo Ran's gaze darted rapidly between those in the crowd, looking for Shi Mei.

“What are you doing, making eyes at zombies?!” Chu Wanning said harshly. “Hurry and fend them off!”

In the chaos of the battle with the ghost mistress, they had ended up standing on a coffin, the slow-moving corpses gathered all around them. Mo Ran lit up a handful of exorcism talismans and threw them forward. Explosion after explosion followed, but there were just too many foes; each defeated wave was rapidly replaced by the next.

Mo Ran was losing his mind. “How are there so many dead people in Butterfly Town? Just how many ghost marriage couples are there?!”

“Just look at this ghost mistress’s cultivation—of course this many young people couldn’t have died of natural causes!” Chu Wanning said, aggravated. “Eight, maybe even nine out of ten were probably bewitched to commit suicide! Attack over there!”

Mo Ran flung another talisman in the direction Chu Wanning indicated. White bone and rotten flesh flew from the resultant explosion.

“How is this ghost mistress not dead yet?”

“Normal weapons can’t hurt it.”

“Then what about Tianwen?”

Chu Wanning was incensed. “Do you not see that Tianwen is still binding it?! This thing is extremely fast—if I were to release the binding, it would be gone before I could even lash it!”

More and more corpses swarmed toward Mo Ran and Chu Wanning. As Mo Ran purged them, he kept an eye out for Shi Mei in the crowd for fear of accidentally injuring him. A golden boy threw itself at Mo Ran and bit him savagely on the leg; he cursed under his breath and flung a talisman on its face before kicking it into the crowd of corpses, where it exploded with a loud bang.

“Do you see Shi Mei and Mistress Chen?” Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran searched frantically before finally spotting two swaying figures in the distance. “I see them!”

“Get the hell over there and pull them back! As far away as you can!”

“Got it!” Mo Ran answered, then paused. “What are you going to do?”

“I can’t lift my other arm to summon another weapon, so I’ll have to use Tianwen,” Chu Wanning said, exasperated. “I’m going to destroy this entire area as soon as I release the ghost mistress, so get lost if you don’t want to die!”

Chapter 18:
This Venerable One Once Begged You

TIANWEN HAD A WIDE-RANGE killing technique with a simple name: Wind. Once activated, it obliterated everything it touched within a given area.

Having personally tasted the ferocity of Wind, Mo Ran was naturally well aware of Chu Wanning's capabilities, and he knew there was no need to worry. He gave that pale-faced man draped in bloodred wedding robes one last glance before throwing the last of his exorcism talismans to buy him some time. Mo Ran then leapt to the side, holding Shi Mei in one arm and grabbing Mistress Chen with the other to take both unconscious people to hide a distance away.

Chu Wanning bore through the searing pain to force his other hand to move. Tianwen immediately lit up with a dazzling golden light, and he drew the willow vine back with a sharp movement.

Once released from this restraint, the ghost mistress's face twisted, and it leapt up to head straight for Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning's blood-soaked robes danced like flames in the wind as he raised his hand toward the heavens, his expression fierce. He whirled Tianwen in the air, and its golden light began to intensify menacingly.

The willow vine rapidly grew in length by several dozen feet as it spun into a golden vortex, drawing in everything in its surroundings. The ghosts, corpses, golden boys and jade maidens, and even the snarling ghost mistress, all of them were pulled into the center of Wind and instantly minced by Tianwen's breakneck ferocity.

This technique was indiscriminately destructive. Nothing escaped its onslaught; even the nearby grass and trees were uprooted. With Chu Wanning as its center, an incandescent golden storm of immense proportions blanketed the skies, and coffins and corpses alike were swept into the gale. It consumed everything in reach, all of it drawn into the storm and torn apart by Tianwen's swift spinning.

All shredded into so much debris…

When the dust settled, Chu Wanning was left alone in the middle of a barren wasteland. Other than his solitary figure standing amidst the ruins, shrouded in brilliant scarlet like a red lotus in first bloom, or a fallen haitang blossom, there was only the ground, covered in shattered white bones, and a terrifying Tianwen, golden light still coursing along its length.

This sight made it pretty clear that Chu Wanning really was being quite considerate when he had whipped those disciples. Considering the preceding demonstration, if he had felt like it, he definitely could have instantly pulverized every single one of them at the Platform of Sin and Virtue…

The golden light gradually faded. Tianwen dissolved into sparkling stardust and returned into Chu Wanning's palm. He exhaled deeply, brows furrowed, and slowly walked toward his disciples in the distance, ignoring the pain in his shoulder.

"How is Shi Mei?" Chu Wanning asked when he reached their side, still suffering silently.

Mo Ran looked down at the as yet-unconscious beauty in his arms. Shi Mei's breaths were shallow and his cheek cold to the touch. This scene was far too familiar, a nightmare that Mo Ran had once been unable to escape, whether in life or in death. That time, Shi Mei had lain in his arms just like this as he gradually stopped breathing…

Chu Wanning leaned down to press his fingers against Mistress Chen and Shi Mei's necks, feeling for their pulse. "Hm?" he murmured. "How has the poison spread this far?"

Mo Ran's head snapped up. "Poison? Didn't you say it was nothing to worry about? Didn't you say they were merely hypnotized?"

Chu Wanning's brow was furrowed. "The ghost mistress uses the fragrance to hypnotize; it's a kind of poison. I expected only minor symptoms, not something of this magnitude."

Mo Ran couldn't speak.

"Take them back to Chen Manor first," Chu Wanning continued. "It isn't difficult to draw out this poison. As long as they're alive, it's fine."

He spoke with a flat, indifferent tone. Even though this was how Chu Wanning usually spoke, in the current circumstances, it made him seem callous and dismissive.

Mo Ran was violently thrust back into his memories of the snowstorm of that one year, when he'd knelt in the snow holding Shi Mei in his arms as Shi Mei's life drained away, bit by bit. Mo Ran's face had been stained with tears, and he'd screamed himself hoarse as he begged Chu Wanning to turn around, to spare his disciple a glance—begged Chu Wanning to lift a hand to save his disciple's life.

But what had Chu Wanning said then? It had been in a dismissive voice with an impassive tone, just like now. And just like that, the only time Mo Ran had ever knelt and begged in his life, he had been refused.

Amidst the falling snow, the person in Mo Ran's arms had gradually grown cold, like the snowflakes that had fallen on his shoulders and clung to his eyelashes.

That day, Chu Wanning had killed two disciples with his own hands.

One was Shi Mingjing, who he could have saved but had not.

The other was Mo Weiyu, whose heart had drowned in grief as he knelt in the snow.

Mo Ran's heart was instantly overcome with dread, with viciousness, with unreconciled malice and savagery that slithered like a snake.

For an instant, he had a violent urge to close his hands around Chu Wanning's neck, to shed this amiable disguise and bare his demonic appearance, to turn into a vicious ghost from a past life and tear into Chu Wanning's flesh, wring out an answer, and exact his revenge.

Revenge for the lives of those two helpless disciples in the snow.

But when he looked up, his gaze landed on Chu Wanning's bloodstained shoulder. The bestial roar died in his throat.

He didn't make another sound as he stared at Chu Wanning's face with a gaze bordering on hatred, but Chu Wanning didn't notice. After a while, Mo Ran lowered his head to look at Shi Mei's pale face. His mind grew blank. If something were to happen to Shi Mei again, then…

The person in his arms abruptly broke into a coughing fit. Mo Ran

startled, heart quivering.

Shi Mei slowly opened his eyes and murmured in a weak, feeble voice. “A…Ran?”

“Yes! It’s me!” Relief and joy washed away all of Mo Ran’s anxieties. His eyes opened wide as he pressed a hand to Shi Mei’s cold cheek, eyes flickering over him. “Shi Mei, how are you feeling? Does anything hurt?”

Shi Mei smiled faintly, features soft. He looked around. “How did we get here? Did I pass out? Ah! Shizun…” He coughed. “This disciple was incompetent… This disciple…”

“Don’t speak.” Chu Wanning fed Shi Mei a pill. “Since you’re awake, hold this poison-cleansing pill in your mouth. Don’t swallow it.”

Shi Mei did so obediently, then startled, even more color draining from his pale face. “Shizun, how did you get injured? You’re covered in blood…”

Chu Wanning answered in that same infuriatingly flat and indifferent tone, “It’s nothing.” He stood and glanced at Mo Ran. “You, figure out a way to take them back to the Chen Manor.”

Now that Shi Mei was awake, Mo Ran’s dejection had completely dissipated. He nodded amenably. “All right!”

“I’m going to head back first. There’s something I need to ask the Chen family.” Chu Wanning turned and left.

When he faced the boundless night, with nothing but withered grass in all directions, he finally couldn’t hold it in anymore. He furrowed his brow, letting the pain show on his face.

His entire shoulder had been pierced by five claws, the flesh and tendons torn. The ghost mistress had cut him deep, down to the bone. However much he might have feigned composure to brave it, even sealing the veins so that he wouldn’t pass out from blood loss, he was still only human. He still felt pain.

But so what if it hurt?

He walked, one foot in front of the other, wedding robes fluttering in the air. All these years, everyone had respected him, feared him, but never had anyone dared to stand by his side. Never had anyone concerned themselves with his well-being. He had long since grown used to this.

Yuheng of the Night Sky, the Beidou Immortal. Unloved from head to toe, uncared for whether alive, dead, sick, or suffering.

It seemed like he had never needed another's support, even from birth, never needed anything to depend on, never needed anyone for company. So there was no need to say it hurt and even less point in crying. He would just go back and dress the injury himself, cut away the torn and dead flesh, and apply some salve. It would be fine.

It didn't matter that no one cared about him. He'd come this far alone anyway. Things had been going fine for all these years. He could take care of himself.

Chu Wanning arrived at the gates to the Chen Manor, but before he could step into the yard, a burst of shrill screams came from within.

Heedless of his wounds ripping open, Chu Wanning rushed inside—only to see Madam Chen with a head of disheveled hair and both eyes closed, chasing her son and husband all over the place. Only the young daughter of the Chen family was spared; she stood nervously to the side, small body cowering in fear and shaking uncontrollably.

At the sight of Chu Wanning, Landlord Chen and his youngest son threw themselves at him with terrified cries. "Daozhang! Daozhang, save us!"

Chu Wanning shielded them behind his body, gaze sweeping over Madam Chen's closed eyes. "Didn't I say to keep your eyes on her and make sure she didn't fall asleep?!" he berated them.

"We couldn't watch her the whole time! My wife's health is frail, so she usually goes to sleep early. After you left, she tried to stay awake at first, but then she dozed off and started going berserk! She was yelling something… Yelling…"

Landlord Chen cowered behind Chu Wanning, shaking, and completely failed to notice both that the daozhang was wearing wedding robes and that he had a gaping wound on his shoulder.

Chu Wanning frowned. "Yelling about what?"

Before Landlord Chen could even open his mouth to respond, the crazed madam charged forward with her teeth bared. But the mournful cry that came from her lips was in the voice of a young girl. "Heartless and

dishonest! Heartless and dishonest! Pay me back with your lives! I want all of you to die!"

"Ghost possession." Chu Wanning looked at Landlord Chen and demanded grimly, "Do you know this voice?"

Landlord Chen's lips trembled, and his eyes darted this way and that. He swallowed nervously as he said, "I don't know it! It's not familiar, I don't recognize it! Daozhang, please save us! Daozhang, please exorcise the ghost!"

By this point, Madam Chen was mere steps away. Chu Wanning lifted his uninjured arm and pointed at her. A bolt of lightning instantly struck the skies and trapped Madam Chen inside a barrier.

"You really don't recognize it?" Chu Wanning asked dispassionately with a sidelong glance.

"I really don't! I really don't!" Landlord Chen cried repeatedly.

Chu Wanning didn't bother wasting any more words. He flung out Tianwen and bound Madam Chen within the barrier.

He really ought to have bound Landlord Chen instead; it would have been both more convenient and easier to dig up the truth. But Chu Wanning had his own principles—he did not frivolously use Tianwen to interrogate normal people. So, he skipped over the easy target to instead interrogate the ghost in Madam Chen's body.

Interrogating ghosts was different from interrogating people. When questioning a person with Tianwen, the person would be unable to bear the torment and directly confess. But when questioning a ghost with Tianwen, a barrier would be formed with only Chu Wanning and the ghost inside, in which the ghost would regain the appearance it had in life and divulge information to Chu Wanning.

Tianwen abruptly ignited in flames, which surged along the vine from Chu Wanning's side all the way to Madam Chen.

The madam shrieked and twitched as the red flames on the willow vine suddenly turned into an eerie blue ghost fire that burned from the madam's side back to Chu Wanning's.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. The flames burned along the willow

vine to his hand, but the ghost fire couldn't hurt him, even as it burned up the length of his arm to his chest, then went out.

The Chen family watched on with horror and apprehension, unsure of what Chu Wanning was doing.

Chu Wanning's eyelashes fluttered lightly, both eyes still closed. A beam of white light slowly grew before him, followed by a fair-skinned foot stepping out of the beam as a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen appeared in his view.

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Chapter 19:
This Venerable One Will Tell You a Story

THE GIRL HAD a charming oval face with fair skin, pleasant features, and large, round eyes. She wore a light-pink ruqun with her hair bound up, and her bearing was that of a new wife, innocent and inexperienced. She dazedly rubbed her eyes and peered around at the darkness surrounding her.

"Where…am I?"

"You are within the Restoration Barrier I have erected," Chu Wanning replied.

The girl was shocked. "Who are you?" she asked, bewildered. "Why is it pitch-black in here? I can't see you. Who's speaking?"

"Have you forgotten? You're already dead," Chu Wanning said.

The girl's eyes widened. "I'm already… I…"

Gradually, her memories came back to her. She lowered her head and pressed her hands to her chest. There was no heartbeat there. She let out a soft sound of understanding and murmured, "I'm… I'm already dead…"

"Only souls can come into this Restoration Barrier. In here, all hatred is erased. Those who have passed, regardless of whether they've transformed into a menacing ghost or a regular spirit, will regain the character and appearance they possessed in life. Hence, 'Restoration.'"

Stunned, the girl was lost in thought for a moment, as if she was gradually recalling her past life. Then she abruptly lowered her face and started weeping silently.

"Do you…have any grievances?" Chu Wanning asked.

The girl's voice was thick with tears. "Are you Lord Yanluo? Or are you Bai Wuchang?[15] Are you here to bring me justice?"

Chu Wanning rested a hand on his temple. "I'm not Lord Yanluo, and neither am I Bai Wuchang."

The girl wept softly.

Chu Wanning remained silent for a while and didn't speak, waiting until she had composed herself somewhat before he spoke again. "However, I am certainly here to bring you justice."

At this, the girl looked up. Though her voice was choked with sobs, she exclaimed in both joy and grief, "So you *are* Lord Yanluo after all!"

Chu Wanning decided not to clarify that assumption and instead asked, "Do you know what you've been doing since you died?"

"I don't know… It's not clear. I only remember I was very, very sad. I wanted revenge… I wanted to go after them… And I wanted to find *him*…"

When souls were first brought back, for a time they would be unable to recall a number of things, but that was fine. Chu Wanning asked patiently, "Who did you want to find?"

"My husband," the girl replied softly. "Chen Bohuan."

Chu Wanning was taken back. Chen Bohuan—wasn't that the name of the eldest son of the Chen family? "What…is your name? Where are you from?"

Tianwen's power filled this world of illusion within the barrier, and the deceased who manifested inside of it would therefore converse with Chu Wanning truthfully and honestly. Thus, the girl responded, "My name is Luo Xianxian. I'm from Butterfly Town."

"Before I came here, I reviewed the ancestry scroll of Butterfly Town. This town only has about five hundred households, none of which are named Luo. Who was your father?"

The girl took her time to recall the details, and the anguish in her eyes grew more acute. "My father used to be a scholar here, a close friend to my father-in-law. Several years ago, he contracted tuberculosis and passed away. After that, I was the only one in the household."

"How did you die?"

The girl was taken aback, then wept harder. "I had no path other than death. They—they deceived my papa and made him leave behind his secret formula for the fragrance. They also beat me and yelled at me, threatened me, made me leave Butterfly Town. I…I was just a weak woman, where else could I have gone? I have no other relatives left in this world… The world is

so big, but where could I have gone? Other than the underworld, where else could I go…?"

Once the memories of her past life had returned to her, her heart seemed to brim with endless suffering and anguish, making her anxious to tell someone of it. Even though Chu Wanning didn't prompt her further, she slowly continued to speak on her own.

It turned out that this Luo Xianxian had lost her mother when she was very young, and according to her father, she also had an elder brother. However, her brother had gone missing during some turmoil in the lower cultivation realm, and they'd never seen him again. Neither did they know if he was alive or dead. She hadn't yet reached her first year of life when her brother went missing—she had still been wrapped in swaddling clothes. Later, when she tried to remember this elder brother of hers, she'd had no impression to speak of.

Thus the Luo household consisted of only Xianxian and her father, and the two depended on each other to survive. They drifted everywhere before finally settling in a small house in Butterfly Town.

Luo Xianxian was five that year. The eldest son of the house of Chen, Chen Bohuan, was older than her by two years.

At the time, the house of Chen hadn't yet struck it rich. The entire family lived squeezed together into a small earthen cottage with two rooms, and next to the low wall in the small yard there grew a tangerine tree. When autumn came along, the tree bore fruits, and the dense branches growing past the low wall peeked into the yard of the Luo family's house.

Luo Xianxian would raise her head to look up at the branches dangling with tangerines, like the lanterns lit for the Lantern Festival. She was an introverted child and didn't play with others. Instead she would sit quietly upon her little folding bench, peeling soybeans while sneaking glances at the tangerines peeking overhead from the Chen family's yard.

The tangerines were vibrant and enticing; against the sun, it was easy to imagine them full to bursting with juice tart and sweet. Luo Xianxian would stare at them fixedly, swallowing hard from time to time, her cheeks aching with hunger.

Even so, she never once extended her hand to pick them. Her father was a mediocre and ineffectual scholar who had failed the civil exams; however, he hadn't failed in the upkeep of his dignity and integrity. In fact, the soured scholar was probably a bit broken in the head; he was constantly telling his daughter to be a "gentleman."

By the age of three, Luo Xianxian already knew that morality ought not be corrupted by wealth, and integrity ought not be compromised by poverty. She might have looked, but her hands never came within an inch of those tangerines so close within reach.

One night, taking advantage of the moonlight, Luo Xianxian sat in the yard to wash clothes, huffing and puffing as she worked. Her father's health wasn't great, and he'd long since gone to bed. Impoverished children learned to take care of their households early, and so the little girl had her sleeves rolled up, her thin little arms soaked in the wooden bucket, her cheeks puffed as she scrubbed with vigor.

Suddenly, a rasping cough came from the front door, and a young man covered in blood stumbled in to glare at her. The little girl was petrified, so much so that she even forgot to scream.

The young man's face was caked in blood and grime, yet his brows were strong and handsome. The two of them eyed each other, one big and one small, frozen in their places. Finally, the young man couldn't hang on anymore, and he slowly slid down a wall and into a sitting position. His breathing was laborious as he croaked, "Give me some water."

Maybe it was because the young man didn't have the look of a villain, or perhaps it was Luo Xianxian's own kindness, but although she was afraid, she ran inside and filled a cup, then brought it to the young man's lips.

The young man didn't hold back either and gulped down the water soundly. When he finished, he wiped at the corners of his mouth, and his eyes lifted to stare at Luo Xianxian's charming face. His gaze was a little intense, but he didn't say a word.

As he didn't speak, Luo Xianxian didn't speak either. She only blinked at him anxiously, staying at a distance she deemed safe, holding her hands not too close and not too far away as she watched this stranger.

"You look a lot like someone I once knew." The young man's lips

suddenly curled up, his eyes curving into crescents as he smiled coldly at her. With all that blood on his face to match his smile, he looked somewhat savage. “Especially the eyes, big and round. They just make people want to dig them out—poke them through with a finger and swallow them whole, one by one.”

Such terrifyingly sinister words were so blandly and casually said, and there was even a little laugh to go with them. Luo Xianxian shivered even harder and covered her eyes without thinking.

“Heh, what a smart little girl,” the young man said. “Keep covering your eyes like that; don’t stare at me. Otherwise, I can’t say what my hands will do.”

He spoke in a northern dialect, with “r” at the end of some of his words.

Moonlight spilled into the yard. The young man was licking his cracked lips when he spotted the tangerine tree outside. For some reason, his eyes lit up. His pupils flickered for a moment before he jerked his chin toward the tree. “Little girl.”

Luo Xianxian was silent.

“Pick a tangerine and peel it for me.”

Luo Xianxian finally moved her lips to speak. Her voice was tiny and quivering, but she spoke without hesitation. “Da-gege, that fruit tree doesn’t belong to my family. It’s someone else’s; I can’t pick from it.”

That young man was taken aback. As if reminded of something, his face slowly turned dark.

“If I say pick, then go pick. I want to eat tangerines, so go pick them for me right now!” The last bit was growled aggressively, spat out from between gritted teeth.

Luo Xianxian shook from fright, but she remained stubbornly where she was. The little girl had a soft personality, but her moral core was as unyieldingly rigid as her father’s. “I won’t.”

The young man narrowed his eyes, snarling at her. “Stupid little girl! Do you know who you’re talking to?!”

“If you want water, I—I’ll pour you some. If you want food, there’s

some of that in our house too. But the tangerine tree doesn't belong to my family, so I can't pick from it. My dad says, 'To take without asking is to steal.' I'm a gentleman; morality ought not be corrupted by wealth, and integrity ought not be com—compromised by pottery…"

In her nervousness, she misspoke and said "pottery" instead of "poverty." This tiny little girl, face red and puffy, sputtered and stuttered out this passable imitation of her father's teachings. Somehow she got the words out, despite how, under the intent gaze of that young man, she was quaking so hard that her knees knocked against each other.

That young man was silent. If the situation had been any different, hearing, "to take without asking is to steal," "morality ought not be corrupted by wealth, and integrity ought not be compromised by poverty," and, "I'm a *gentleman*," from the mouth of a kid—and a little girl at that?! Pfft, he really wouldn't have been able to hold back his laughter.

But he couldn't laugh. Instead, a violent, soaring anger trampled through his chest like so many horses, stomping on his heart.

"I hate people like you the most, the so-called…" Holding onto the wall, he shakily rose to his feet, words squeezing out from between his lips. "Philanthropists, gentlemen, heroes—*virtuous people*."

Under the terrified gaze of Luo Xianxian, he painstakingly stumbled over to the tangerine tree on his injured feet. He raised his head, sniffing at the scent of tangerines with greedy yearning. Then a hateful crimson flashed within his eyes, and before Luo Xianxian knew what was happening, he'd climbed onto that tree and started violently shaking it, kicking it, knocking at it, and beating it.

Whole branches of tangerines were soundly shaken off the tree. They tumbled to the ground, rolling to the side. The smile of that young man was twisted as he yelled recklessly, "So much for, 'to take without asking is to steal'! So much for, 'morality ought not be corrupted by wealth!' So much for, 'strength is not to be exploited'!"

"Da-gege! What are you doing?! Please stop! Papa! Papa!"

Luo Xianxian hadn't wanted to call for her father. He was of weak constitution, a scholar with no strength in his body. Even if he came out, there wasn't much he would be able to do. But after all, she was a little girl.

Having held on to this point, she was finally scared past her breaking point.

"The hell are you yelling for?! If your daddy comes out, I'll chop him down too!"

The little girl was terrified into silence, tears welling in her big, round eyes.

The Chen family next door had gone to visit relatives in the neighboring village, and so none of them were home. There was no one around to stop this lunatic.

The lunatic shook the tree until all the tangerines had fallen from it. Even then, his madness couldn't be sated, and he stomped heavily on the ground, crushing many of the fruits. Then, with a sudden aggression and using a burst of strength from who knew where, he leapt up and flipped into the Chen family's yard, found an axe, and chopped down the tree in a few strokes. After, he flipped back over and laughed heartily.

He laughed and laughed, until he abruptly stopped and squatted down, spacing out. He twisted his head over and beckoned Luo Xianxian over. "Little girl, come here."

Luo Xianxian didn't move. She stayed where she was, shuffling her little cloth shoes embroidered with yellow flowers.

The young man saw that she was hesitating and softened his tone, speaking with as much kindness as he could muster. "Come. I've got something nice for you."

"I…I don't want to… No, I'm not coming over…" Luo Xianxian mumbled.

But before she could finish speaking, the young man erupted in rage again. "If you don't come here right this instant, I'm gonna go into your house and chop your dad into minced meat!"

Luo Xianxian shuddered violently and finally, little by little, shuffled toward him.

The young man looked askance at her. "Hurry up. I don't have time to watch you wriggle around."

Luo Xianxian drew closer to him, head bowed. When she was still a few steps away, he flung out his hand and yanked her over. Luo Xianxian let

out a squeal—or tried to, because before the sound could leave her mouth, it was shoved back inside by an object. The young man had stuffed a tangerine in her mouth, unpeeled and unwashed, covered in mud.

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How could Luo Xianxian possibly eat a tangerine in just one bite? Yet the young man forcefully stuffed it in. The tangerine ripped as it was crushed against her, juice and mud smeared over half her face. The lunatic was cackling, squishing the fruit on her mouth, trying to shove it past her tightly shut lips.

"Aren't you a *gentleman*? Weren't you not going to steal? Then what are you eating right now, huh? *What are you eating right now?!*"

"No…I don't want it… Papa…Papa…" Luo Xianxian whimpered.

"Swallow it." The young man's eyes curved into slits, and he stuffed the last bit of fruit into Luo Xianxian's mouth. His eyes shone darkly, and his voice was chilling and cold. "Swallow the damn thing!"

The young man watched Luo Xianxian as she was forced to swallow the tangerine, sobs choking from her throat as she weakly cried for her father. He was quiet for a moment, then smiled. That smile was more terrifying than his prior savage expression.

He ruffled Luo Xianxian's hair, satisfied. "Why call for your papa?" he said warmly as he continued to squat there. "Shouldn't you call for your da-gege? Is the tangerine your gege gave you sweet? Is it good?"

Then he picked up another one from the ground. This time, he didn't try to force it into her mouth. Instead, he attentively peeled off the skin—even picking off the white fibers sticking to the flesh—before he wiped his hands, pulled out a piece, and brought it to Luo Xianxian's lips. He said with a chiding, gentle voice, "If you like it, then eat some more."

Luo Xianxian understood that she'd run into someone who was mentally disturbed. Left without any choice, she bowed her head and wordlessly munched on the tangerine that the lunatic passed to her. Its sweetly tart juice diffused in her throat, making her stomach turn over.

The young man continued to squat there, feeding her tangerines piece by piece. He seemed to be in a good mood again, and he even hummed a tune. His voice was rough and coarse, like a damaged basket with a breeze blowing through its holes, fuzzy and unclear, but some of the words floated into Luo Xianxian's ears.

Three, four drops of petals upon the pond,

One, two cries of strings rang from ashore

Youthful years before crowing be the best of years,

Hooves light, horses fast,

See the ends of the world…

"Little girl," he suddenly said.

Luo Xianxian did not respond.

"Tsk." He pressed his lips together and reached out to grab Luo Xianxian's little face with his hand. "Let me take a look at your eyes."

Luo Xianxian was shaking, but without any power to retaliate, she could only allow that young man to examine her eyes thoroughly, letting those bloody fingers rub over her brows inch by inch.

"Such a strong resemblance," he said.

Luo Xianxian whimpered as she shut her eyes, scared that this lunatic would pick out her eyes the way he had the fruits—on a whim.

But the young man didn't pick anything. He only said to her in a somber, chilling tone, "Didn't you teach me the saying, 'morality ought not be corrupted by wealth, and integrity ought not be compromised by poverty'? Da-gege has something to tell you too."

Luo Xianxian sobbed.

"Open your eyes."

Luo Xianxian's eyes were tightly shut.

That young man laughed in exasperation. "I won't dig your eyes out—now open them!" he said, voice hoarse. Then, "Do you think I won't be able to poke your eyes out even if you have them closed?!"

Luo Xianxian could do nothing but obey. She opened her big, round eyes. Her long, soft lashes quivered, and large beads of tears fell from them. The fearful and pitiful look on her face seemed to somehow please the mysterious young man. He loosened the hand that was squeezing her cheek. It hovered in the air for a moment, then tenderly patted her head.

He stared at her eyes intently, a trembling smile curling from the corner of his lips. His grin was seven parts twisted, two parts savage, and one

part sorrowful. He said, “There was a man from Linyi whose heart died at twenty.”

Then, done speaking, he turned around, and his figure slowly disappeared into the shadows.

The only indication that this person had ever been there, a person who appeared in the depths of night all covered in blood, was the mess left behind on the ground.

Chapter 20:
This Venerable One Will Tell You a Story (Pt. 2)

THE NEXT MORNING, the Chen family came back from visiting their relatives only to see that their tangerine tree had been chopped down, its fruits strewn across the ground. There weren't many families living in the area, and only the Luo family lived close by. When they recalled the way Luo Xianxian had looked gluttonously at the tangerines, they swiftly concluded…

That the tangerines must have been stolen by that unlucky child, Luo Xianxian! And not only had she stolen them, she'd even jealously chopped down the tree!

The Chen family immediately went to Scholar Luo, full of accusations. Of course, Scholar Luo wasn't about to take this kind of humiliation. He promptly called his daughter over and asked angrily if she had stolen the tangerines.

Luo Xianxian cried as she answered she hadn't.

Then she was asked if she'd chopped down the tree.

Luo Xianxian continued to answer that she hadn't.

And then she was asked if she'd sneakily eaten any tangerines.

Luo Xianxian couldn't lie. She could only answer that she had.

Before she even had time to explain, her father flew into a mortified rage and ordered her to kneel. He disciplined her with a ruler in front of the Chen family, and as he beat her, he said, "Daughters are truly worthless! You're so young, yet you're already a little thief! Shame on you! You're an embarrassment! No food for you today! Face the wall and repent for three days—"

"Papa, it wasn't me! It really wasn't me!"

"Don't you dare talk back to me!"

Nobody believed her. Although chaos reigned in the lower cultivation realm, Butterfly Town was an exception. The residents of this town lived simple and honest lives, and nobody even locked their doors at night. And

she claimed that a lunatic covered in blood had turned up in the middle of the night? Who could believe that?

The skin on Luo Xianxian's hands was left raw and bleeding from all the ruler's strikes. The Chen family watched on unsympathetically. Only the oldest boy differed; he tugged on the corner of his mother's clothing as if he wanted to say something. But his mother paid him no attention. Left with no choice, he furrowed his rather comely little face and stood off to the side, unwilling to continue watching.

That night, Luo Xianxian was too afraid to return inside, and she crouched under the roof of her house to miserably carry out her punishment.

Her father being a scholar, theft was something he could not abide. On top of that, he tended to dwell on things and was nothing if not stubborn. There was no point in talking to him, as he would refuse to listen to reason.

After a day of starvation, Luo Xianxian was beginning to feel faint. Out of nowhere, a voice called out softly to her, "Luo-meimei."

Luo Xianxian turned around and noticed a head with comely facial features sticking up over the earthen wall. It was the boy who had tried to plead for her earlier, the eldest son of the Chen household, Chen Bohuan.

Chen Bohuan looked around, and after making sure no one could see him, he climbed over the earthen wall. He took a hot mantou from within his robes and stuffed it into Luo Xianxian's hand without any explanation. "I saw you standing by the foot of this wall for an entire day with nothing to eat. This mantou's for you; go ahead and eat it."

"I…" Luo Xianxian was shy by nature; though she had lived in this house for quite a few months, she had barely exchanged any words with the gege next door. Now she looked at him up close, and she couldn't help but back away a couple of steps, hitting her head against the wall with a *thud*. "I can't take it…" she stammered. "Papa won't let me… He said…"

She stuttered incoherently for a while, unable to explain herself.

"Aiya, your father yammers on about sayings all day," said Chen Bohuan. "Don't mind him too much. Starving like this is bad for you. Eat up, before it gets cold."

The mantou was white and tender, soft and fluffy, still hot enough to

steam. Luo Xianxian lowered her head and stared at it for a moment, and she swallowed her saliva with a gulp.

However, she really was beyond famished. Thinking nothing of, "gentlemanly behavior this" and, "gentlemanly behavior that," she grabbed the mantou and stuffed it into her mouth. In no time at all, it was gone.

After she finished, she looked up with her round eyes. The first full sentence she said to Chen Bohuan was, "I didn't chop down the tangerine tree, and I didn't want to steal anything."

Chen Bohuan was taken aback for a moment, then he slowly started to smile. "Mn."

"But none of them believed me…" Under his nonjudgmental gaze, Luo Xianxian gradually began to open up. Her grievances, like ice and snow melting, began to pour out. She opened her mouth and let out a wail, and she sobbed as she wiped away her tears. "None of them believed me… I didn't steal anything… I didn't steal…"

Chen Bohuan patted her frantically. "I know you didn't. Aiya, you stood under that tree every day, never taking a single tangerine. If you wanted to steal one, you would have done it a long time ago…"

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me!" Luo Xianxian wailed even harder, tears and snot trickling down her face.

Chen Bohuan continued to pat her. "It wasn't you. It wasn't you."

And just like that, the two of them began to grow close.

Later, a murder occurred in a neighboring village. Rumor had it that one night, a blood-soaked bandit broke into a house and demanded he be given a room to stay the night. The man of the house refused, and so the bandit killed the entire family. Then he'd casually slept through the night in the corpse-filled room, not leaving until the next day. But before leaving, he'd used the blood to write a long rant on the walls, documenting all the wonderful deeds he'd done—as if he was afraid that the world wouldn't remember the existence of such a fiend.

The news spread like wildfire and soon reached Butterfly Town. After comparing the dates, it became clear this had happened on the exact night that Luo Xianxian had met that "lunatic da-gege."

Scholar Luo and the Chen family were all left speechless.

With the misunderstanding resolved, the two families grew closer as well. The Chen couple realized Luo Xianxian wasn't just cute with the makings of a beauty, she was also hardworking and sensible. Considering their own family circumstances, it would probably be difficult to find a better daughter-in-law. And thus, they arranged for an engagement between Chen Bohuan and Luo Xianxian. Once the two were of age, they would have a formal ceremony. Scholar Luo thought his daughter and Chen Bohuan were a pretty good match, and thus he happily agreed.

Time passed, day by day. If Scholar Luo hadn't had an interest in elegant things and liked to dabble in perfumery, perhaps the two families would have lived out the modest but content life they initially imagined for themselves. If there was anyone to blame, it was Scholar Luo for creating, even if accidentally, the "Hundred Butterfly Fragrance."

The fragrance's scent was nothing special, being not particularly different from the ones commonly found in town. But it had a benefit that the other fragrances didn't: the scent lasted for one hundred days, lingering endlessly.

Because Hundred Butterfly Fragrance held its scent for an exceptionally long time, it was exactly the type of high-quality yet inexpensive product that every household sought. Even so, Scholar Luo believed in the saying, "Everything is inferior; only knowledge is superior." He had created the fragrance, but he was unwilling to sell it, believing this would be beneath his dignity.

However, although he didn't intend to sell it, of course someone else had their mind on doing so.

Madam Chen tried to obtain the formula from Scholar Luo and encouraged him to open a store, only to be rejected. After a few attempts, Madam Chen didn't want to keep making a fool of herself, so she no longer brought it up. Nevertheless, deep down in her heart, she continued to keep it in her thoughts.

The year that Luo Xianxian turned fifteen, an opportunity arose. Scholar Luo had always been sickly, and he contracted tuberculosis. After a few days of suffering, he passed away. As Luo Xianxian's mother-in-law—even though she and Chen Bohuan hadn't officially married yet, the

sentiments were as such—Madam Chen helped arrange the funeral, busying herself back and forth.

Luo Xianxian was moved to tears. However, she didn't realize that Madam Chen harbored hidden intentions. While the madam organized Scholar Luo's belongings, she quietly swiped the formula for the perfume.

That night, Madam Chen lit an oil lantern, full of excitement and ready to read the formula. After only one glance, she was left dumbfounded. Scholar Luo's writing was like a dance between a dragon and a phoenix; the characters were written in an elegant, confident, *cursive* script. Even after staring at the formula for half a day, she couldn't understand a single word. Left without any other choice, she could only quietly return it to its rightful place.

After a few months, when Luo Xianxian was less distraught, Madam Chen invited the girl over for a meal. During their casual chatter, she "unintentionally" brought up the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance.

Luo Xianxian thought to herself, *The formula has no use if it's just tucked away in the house. Madam Chen has always been kind to me; if she wants it, I can give it to her.*

Thus, she retrieved it from her father's possessions and even helped Madam Chen interpret the writing. Little by little, Luo Xianxian worked out the complex formula.

Madam Chen was over the moon. Once she obtained the formula, she and her husband began to plan to open a fragrance powder shop.

Of course, at that time, Madam Chen still treasured her kindly, sensible future daughter-in-law. The older Luo Xianxian got, the prettier she became. Even though her family had met misfortune, her appearance was one in a hundred. Quite a few young men in town had even begun to notice her.

The longer we let things drag on, the higher the chances of complications arising, Madam Chen thought to herself. They needed to take care of this matter as quickly as possible.

However, Luo Xianxian had just lost her father. According to the traditions of Butterfly Town, if one's parents were to pass, one could not wed for the following three years. But how could Madam Chen afford to wait three years? She thought it through and came up with a solution.

One day, Luo Xianxian was braiding the hair of the Chen family's youngest daughter. She had a close friendship with this girl. Every day, it was "Luo-jiejie this" and "Luo-jiejie that"; the girl followed her around like a little tail.

Madam Luo stepped into the courtyard and called Luo Xianxian into the inner hall. "Xianxian, you and Bohuan are childhood sweethearts, and you're also engaged," she said. "Now that your father has passed, you're all alone, and your life has been quite difficult. You were supposed to marry into our family this year, but the three-years rule must be respected, and now you can't even marry. I was thinking: How old are you going to be in three years?"

Luo Xianxian lowered her head and didn't say anything. But she was clever and could guess what Madam Chen was about to say next. Her cheeks began to turn pink.

Sure enough, Madam Chen continued. "Living alone is difficult and tiring. Why not marry into our family now instead? We can conduct the ceremony behind closed doors to keep it quiet from outsiders. If anybody asks, you can tell them you're staying with me and I'm taking care of you. This way, you can get married without inviting outside scrutiny and criticism. Your departed father will be at ease as well. Once the three years are over, we'll have a proper ceremony in style. Is that all right?"

Her words all sounded like they were in Luo Xianxian's best interests. Luo Xianxian, as someone who had no bad intentions and would therefore never imagine others did, naturally agreed.

Later, through the sales of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, the Chen family became wealthy. They moved out of their old home and purchased a large piece of land in town. After much building and renovations, they became a large, influential family.

Thus Luo Xianxian lived a rarely seen existence, obscured in the shadows of this great clan. Everybody in town genuinely thought that the reason Luo Xianxian lived with them was because Madam Chen had been kind enough to look after her. No one knew that she was actually married to Chen Bohuan.

Although a little unhappy with the state of things, Luo Xianxian only thought her mother-in-law had arranged things like this to avoid rumors, and

that it was all for her own sake. So, she didn't have any complaints. Moreover, Chen Bohuan treated her with sincerity, and the time they spent together was sweet and loving. They were only waiting for the three years to pass, at which point everything would go back to the way it was supposed to be.

But the day of the official marriage ceremony, the day that Luo Xianxian was waiting for, never came.

The Chen family's business was flourishing, and Chen Bohuan was quite handsome. Soon enough, it wasn't just the girls in Butterfly Town who noticed him; even the daughters of rich families in the neighboring villages started eyeing the eldest Chen-gongzi. Bit by bit, Madam Chen's heart began to waver.

When she'd arranged the engagement between the children years ago, it had been because they were simple farmers and weren't going to find anyone better, and so she had hurriedly laid claim to Luo Xianxian.

Who could've anticipated this reversal in fortune—that the Chen family would one day become so wildly successful? When she looked at Luo Xianxian now, she felt that the girl was not elegant or clever enough, that she was dumb and dull, just like her damned, dry tree-root of an old man. The more she looked, the more irritating she found the girl.

She regretted it a little. Then the appearance of Young Mistress Yao turned this "a little" into "completely."

Young Mistress Yao was the governor's pampered daughter, who was tomboyish and had a preference for martial attire. One day she returned from the hunt atop a fine horse, and she passed a fragrance shop where she stopped to look. But rather than picking out any fragrances, she instead picked out the handsome and hardworking young man inside the store.

That young man was none other than Chen Bohuan, Luo Xianxian's husband in all but name.

Chapter 21:
This Venerable One Will Tell You a Story (Pt. 3)

YOUNG MISTRESS YAO had a spirited personality. Once home, she cared for neither food nor drink, and instead she spent all her time pestering her papa to go ask around about this Chen Bohuan person. Although Chen Bohuan was already married, the ceremony had been conducted behind closed doors; who outside the family could have known? The townspeople hadn't even heard of the arranged betrothal between the Luo and Chen families all those years ago.

And so it was that the Young Mistress Yao was informed that this Chen-gongzi was unmarried.

The governor spared no effort in looking into this person, and in the end, he decided that this young man Chen was a capable fellow with a gentle personality and a satisfactory family. As such, he sent a messenger to the Chens with a marriage proposal.

On receiving this, Landlord Chen was so full of regret that his intestines nearly turned blue. They politely told the governor's messenger that they needed some time to think it over, closed the door, and immediately started arguing with each other.

"Look where your rushing has landed us!" said Landlord Chen. "That broke scholar died early, and his daughter should've stayed in mourning for three years; if you hadn't urged them to get married ahead of time, our son could have gotten out of the engagement! Look at this mess now!"

Madam Chen was just as anxious. "Oh, so you're blaming me? Weren't you the one who wanted to arrange the betrothal back then? This is the governor's precious daughter we're talking about here! How could that Xian…that Luo Xianxian even hope to compare?"

The pair of old bastards argued behind closed doors till they were red in the face. Out of steam and their energy spent, they were left staring across the table at each other.

"What should we do?" asked Landlord Chen. "Maybe we should turn

the governor down."

"Absolutely not," said Madam Chen. "Our family is counting on this precious mistress for fame and fortune."

"Do you really think Young Mistress Yao would be willing to be a concubine?" Landlord Chen shot back angrily. "Do you? Our son already has someone—how are we to squeeze in another? And besides, look at how in love they are!"

Madam Chen was quiet for a while, then her eyes lit up. "Say, old Chen," she murmured. "The way I see it, no one outside our family even knows about this thing between Luo Xianxian and our son…"

There was silence for a moment while Landlord Chen stared blankly before he suddenly understood his wife's meaning. He quivered a little, half from apprehension, half from excitement. "Y-you mean…"

"If no one knows about the marriage, then it never happened," Madam Chen said. "We'll chase her out, one way or another. If asking nicely doesn't work, then we'll just use force. Everyone thinks our son is yet unmarried. And do you remember that incident from when she was younger, where she stole tangerines? As long as all of us stick to the story, even if she grows extra mouths to cry about it, who would believe her?"

Landlord Chen strode to the door to make sure it was closed tight, then sidled over. A mere moment ago, the two had been arguing like a pair of fighting cocks, but now they were huddled together, scheming in quiet whispers.

"I don't think it'll work," Landlord Chen said.

"Why not?"

"Our son will never agree to it. He's liked Luo Xianxian ever since he was little, and now you want him to just up and ditch her? Do you really think he'll go along with that?"

Madam Chen thought for a while, then patted her husband's hand. "Don't you worry. I'll take care of it."

Before long, Madam Chen suddenly came down with a grave illness. It was a strange illness; the doctor couldn't find anything wrong with her, but

she spent the entire day raving, muttering nonsense, swearing that she was being possessed by a ghost.

Worried sick, Landlord Chen invited a cultivator to see her. This cultivator had a horsetail whisk and an ethereal air. He pinched his ring finger and thumb together and divined that someone in the Chen family meant ill toward Madam Chen. Left unresolved, she would not live to see the next year.

Chen Bohuan was very filial, and he anxiously asked, “Who bears ill will toward my mother?”

The priest walked around for quite a while in enigmatic pretension before saying it was, “a beauty who never sees the sun.”

Everyone in the room was shocked. One by one, the Chen brothers turned to stare at Luo Xianxian.

Luo Xianxian was just as shocked. Ever since she was little, others had always said certain things about her: that she was unlucky, that she brought misfortune on all those around her, and that she had killed her mother at birth, then her brother, then her father. Now fingers were pointing at her again, saying that she was going to kill her mother-in-law.

In their distress, the Chen brothers took turns talking to Luo Xianxian. They asked her to leave, saying that no one outside their home knew that she was married and thus her reputation was still intact, that they would give her some money and she could go find another family.

Luo Xianxian was anxious and frightened, and, afraid that she really was the one cursing Madam Chen, she cried day after day.

Chen Bohuan’s heart ached, watching his mother grow weaker by the hour. He was stuck between the two—not wanting Xianxian to leave, but also not wanting his mother to suffer—and this stress caused him to rapidly lose weight.

Eventually, the Chen brothers had had enough. One day, while their eldest brother was out, they went to find their sister-in-law. They found Luo Xianxian in the greenhouse, making Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, and rushed in, smashing all her tools. The heavily-scented powder covered her all over, its fragrance blanketing her as if it had soaked into her bones, impossible to wash out.

At first, the brothers surrounded her and sermonized at length about principles and such, “women’s duty,” this, “parents before wife,” that. But though Luo Xianxian was a timid person, she was also stubborn and resilient in her own way. She cried, saying that she didn’t want to leave, and begged them to please think of another way.

The second Chen brother grew agitated. He stepped up and slapped her, saying, “You harbinger of disaster, you’re going to curse our mother to death! If there was another way, would your dad have died? Would your mom? Would your brother be missing, his whereabouts unknown?”

With his one hit, the others took their cue. They rushed in as well and closed in around her with punches and kicks, yelling, “get the fuck out,” “unlucky pest,” and, “bringer of death.”

These brothers were of one mind with their mother and had been in on her plan since long ago. They jumped on this chance while their eldest brother was out and worked together to drive Luo Xianxian away, threatening to beat her every day if she dared to come back—she had no family anyway, so even if they beat her to death, no one would care to seek justice for her.

That night was a snowy one. Luo Xianxian was tossed out into the cold, her entire body beaten black and blue; one of her shoes had even fallen off. She crawled forward slowly, the choked sobs that made their way out of her mouth sounding like the cries of a dying cub.

The night grew deeper, and the snow kept falling. Who would leave their homes in weather like that? And so Luo Xianxian crawled in the endless snow, not knowing where to go, not knowing where she *could* go.

The Chen brothers were right. She had no family—no father, no brother, no one to turn to, no one who would shelter her. This pure-white world was vast, but it had no place for her.

Her body was frail to start with, and she hadn’t been wearing much when she was chased out. As she shivered, her legs and feet quickly became numb and lost all feeling.

She crawled to the outskirts of the town, to the temple of the ghost mistress, and took shelter inside. There she curled into herself, lips blue from the chill, heart cold from the sorrow.

She looked up at the splendid, painted clay idol and couldn’t help the

tears rolling down her cheeks. She thought about the customs of the lower cultivation realm, in which marriages were witnessed by a master of ceremonies. But at her wedding, all she'd had was a red flower tucked behind her ear when she, smiling, knelt across from Chen Bohuan and bowed to the ground.

Had that ceremony behind closed doors been no more than a dream? Had the blushing face in the copper mirror that day been a mere reverie born of her dearest longings?

Luo Xianxian knelt before the statue of the ghost mistress, dragging her frozen body that grew heavier by the moment, kowtowing again and again, her tears mixed with laughter. "Entwining their hair, new husband and wife / Ensure their love shall ne'er be unwound. Joy…on this…eve…"

She grew dizzy, vision blurring.

It was as if a sheen of moonlight lit up a mirage of that day in the yard when she'd cried, "It wasn't me, it wasn't me, I didn't steal the tangerines."

But repeated rumor became fact, and gossip was a frightful thing; no one had listened to her side of the story.

Even now, she knew that if she were to go crying to the people of the town, even if she were to swear up and down that she was Chen Bohuan's properly wedded wife, no one would believe her. She was still the little girl that no one would listen to, standing by that low wall. She was no different. Nothing had changed.

At least back then, there had been someone who climbed over the wall and pressed a steamy, white mantou into her hands, who had said to her, "You must be hungry. Hurry and eat."

But…where was that person now?

When he returned and couldn't find her, would he fret, or would he secretly breathe a sigh of relief because she wouldn't curse his mother anymore?

Luo Xianxian curled up in the temple, the tears she shed slowly drying. She whispered, "Mistress of Ceremonies, I want to be with him. I'm his wife… There was no one to witness our wedding… You are a ghost mistress, and you don't deal with the living, but I…I can only…I can only talk to

you…”

Her last words came out as a broken sob. “I didn’t lie…”

I didn’t lie.

The snow continued falling without a sound in the long, silent night.

The next day, some townspeople passing by the temple found Luo Xianxian’s ice-cold body.

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Chapter 22:
This Venerable One's Shizun Is About to Get Angry

AFTER HEARING ALL THIS, Chu Wanning was livid. He wished only to withdraw the willow vine from Luo Xianxian and redirect it with vigor toward the Chen couple. But he couldn't open his eyes to curse them out just yet, because the restoration illusion would instantly disappear if he were to do so. A ghost could only be trapped by the Restoration Barrier once; if he interrupted Luo Xianxian, he would never hear the rest of what she had to say.

So, he could only weather the rage burning within him as he listened to the rest of Luo Xianxian's story.

After death, her numb and disoriented spirit went to the underworld.

She remembered only a lady dressed in resplendent colors, who looked quite like the ghost mistress in the temple, standing before her and asking in a soft voice, "You and Chen Bohuan could not lay together in life, but do you wish to be buried together in death?"

"I do… I do!" she answered in a panic.

"Then I will have him come keep you company right away, all right?"

Luo Xianxian almost blurted out an eager, unthinking agreement, but she suddenly remembered something and paused. "Am I dead?"

"Yes. I am the ghost mistress of ceremonies of the underworld; I can bestow upon you a good match, fulfilling your longtime wish."

"Then if he comes to keep me company, will he…also die?" Luo Xianxian said in a daze.

"Yes. But the heavens are compassionate; life or death is insignificant, merely a closing of the eyes. What's the difference?"

Just as expected, Chu Wanning thought upon hearing this. *This ghost mistress uses trickery to lure people into asking it to take the lives of others. What an abominable deity.*

Although Luo Xianxian had died a wrongful death, she was not a malicious ghost. She shook her head repeatedly. “No, please don’t kill him. It wasn’t his fault.”

The ghost mistress gave her a melancholy smile. “Such kindness. But what will you get in return?”

However, it didn’t try to change her mind; as a deity, coaxing people into making malevolent wishes was fine, but coercion was not. Gradually, its figure faded away and its voice became indistinct.

“The soul returns on the seventh day,” it said. “When you visit the living world on that day, go see what the Chen family is up to. Then I will come to you again, to see if you are still without regrets.”

Seven days later, on the day of return, Luo Xianxian’s spirit regained awareness and visited the world of the living. She followed the familiar roads to Chen Manor, eager to see her husband one last time.

Unexpectedly, Chen Manor was festively adorned with lanterns and banners, the reception area piled high with bridal betrothal gifts, and a massive Xi character hanging in the main hall. Madam Chen’s face was glowing, plagued by no sign of illness whatsoever, and she beamed as she directed servants to pack the betrothal gifts with red silk and ornate decorations.

Who was…getting married?

Who was…preparing betrothal gifts?

Who was…sparing no expense? How very grand.

Who was…

Luo Xianxian weaved between the busy crowd, listening to the drone of voices.

“Madam Chen, congratulations on the engagement of your son to Governor Yao’s daughter. When’s the engagement feast?”

“Madam Chen is certainly blessed.”

“Young Mistress Yao truly is the Chen family’s lucky star! The betrothal was just settled, and Madam Chen is already looking much better.”

“Your son and Young Mistress Yao are as gold and jade, a match made

in heaven. I'm so envious, ha ha ha ha."

Your son… Your son… Which son? Who is marrying the daughter of the Yao family?

Frantically, Luo Xianxian roamed the familiar halls and yard, looking for that familiar silhouette amidst the chatter and laughter.

She found it.

Chen Bohuan stood before the peonies in the rear hall, his face wan and cheeks sunken. But he was dressed in red—not wedding robes, but Butterfly Town's traditional butterfly-embroidered red robes, worn by a future son-in-law when he went to a bride's house to propose.

He was…going to propose? All of these lavish gifts, dripping with gold, silver, and pearls, all of them had been prepared by him…by Chen Bohuan, her husband, for the daughter of the Yao family?

Luo Xianxian found herself recalling when the two of them had been married: there had been nothing, just two people, one heart, and nothing else.

No master of ceremonies, no bridesmaid or best man, no gifts. The Chen family had not yet found prosperity and had not had so much as a single decent set of jewelry. Chen Bohuan had walked to the tangerine tree in the yard that they'd planted together and plucked a delicate blossom to carefully tuck in her hair.

She had asked him, "How do I look?"

"Beautiful," he had said. Then he had been silent for a moment before stroking her hair apologetically. "You deserve better."

Luo Xianxian had smiled and said she didn't mind.

Chen Bohuan had said to her that when he formally married her in three years' time, he would absolutely make it up to her with a grand ceremony, and everyone would be invited. He would pick her up with a big sedan carried by eight men, adorn her in gold and silver, and the reception would be filled with betrothal gifts.

The promise made that year rang in her ears. Here and now, the ceremony was grand, and everyone was invited. But he was marrying someone else.

Anger and sorrow washed over Luo Xianxian. She screamed as she tore at the red silks and brocades in the room. But, being a ghost, she couldn't physically touch any of them.

As if he sensed something, Chen Bohuan looked back, his gaze hollow as he stared blankly at the silks in the room. There was no wind, yet they drifted.

His little sister walked over. There was a white jade hairpin in her hair; she was mourning for someone, in secret. "Da-ge, please eat something. You haven't eaten properly for days, and you still have to travel to the governor's residence to propose. At this rate, your body won't hold up."

"Xiao-mei, do you hear someone crying?" Chen Bohuan asked out of the blue.

"Huh? No. Da-ge, are you…" She gritted her teeth and didn't finish the thought.

Chen Bohuan continued to stare at the place where the silks drifted. "How is Mother? Is she in a good mood? Has she recovered from her illness?"

"Da-ge…"

"It's good that she's recovered." Chen Bohuan stood there spacing out for a while, then mumbled to himself, "I've already lost Xianxian. I can't lose Mother too."

"Da-ge, please go eat…"

Luo Xianxian cried, screamed, held her head, keened in anguish. *Don't… Don't go… Don't leave…*

"All right," said Chen Bohuan.

His exhausted figure turned a corner and disappeared.

Luo Xianxian stood there alone in a daze, fat droplets of tears rolling down her cheeks. By chance, the voices of the Chen brothers who had caused her death wafted toward her. It was the second and youngest brothers whispering to one another.

"Mother is overjoyed. Whew, things are finally falling into place."

"You don't say! It took half a year of pretending to be sick to finally

force out that unlucky pest. How could she not be happy?"

The youngest brother clicked his tongue. "I can't believe she just up and died, though," he exclaimed. "We only threw her out—it's not like we wanted to *kill* her. How stupid was she? Did she not even know to go find help?"

"Who knows? Maybe she was just thin-skinned like her sourpuss father. It's not our fault she died. Mother might have duped her, but things were difficult for us too. Just think about it—between the governor's daughter and some peasant girl, only an idiot would choose her. Besides, if we offended Young Mistress Yao, things wouldn't end well for us."

"You're right, that girl was just a dumbass. If she wanted to freeze to death, that's on no one else."

These were the words that reached Luo Xianxian's ears. Only in death did she finally understand that being a so-called "bringer of misfortune" just meant that she was poor and low-status, and that she couldn't compare to the governor's honored daughter.

Only an idiot would choose the peasant girl.

Luo Xianxian finally lost it. She returned to the temple of the ghost mistress, heart filled with hatred and resentment. She had died there, weak and helpless. She returned there now, bitter and stonehearted.

Luo Xianxian had once been so kind and good-natured, but now she called up all the hatred she had felt in her lifetime, and all the wickedness in her character that she had never before let loose. She screamed her throat raw, her eyes red, her soul quivering.

"I, Luo Xianxian, am willing to give up my soul to become a malicious ghost. I beg the Ghost Mistress only for vengeance! I want the entire Chen family to die *miserably*! I want her… I want that mother-in-law of mine, who is worse than a beast, to kill her sons with her own hands! *All of them!* I want Chen Bohuan to come keep me company in hell! To be buried with me! I refuse to accept this! I hate them! I *hate* them!"

Upon the shrine, the clay idol lowered its eyelids, the corner of its lips curving into a smirk. A voice echoed inside the temple.

"Your worship has been accepted, and your wish will be fulfilled.

Henceforth, you are a malicious ghost. Go forth and slaughter all who have wronged you…"

A piercing, bloodred light flashed, and after that, Luo Xianxian remembered nothing.

But Chu Wanning already knew what had happened next. The ghost mistress controlled Luo Xianxian the malicious ghost to possess Madam Chen and murder the Chen family, one by one.

Chen Bohuan had been in that red coffin dug up on the mountainside in order to fulfill Luo Xianxian's wish: "I want Chen Bohuan to be buried with me." On top of that, the ghost mistress had intentionally placed the coffin where Chen Bohuan and his new wife were going to build their house as both curse and vengeance.

As for the scent inside Chen Bohuan's coffin, it was that of the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance that had been on Luo Xianxian's body when she died. The coffin had been filled with both strong resentful energy and that heavy fragrance because Luo Xianxian's soul had been asleep inside with Chen Bohuan.

Luo Xianxian had no family left. When such a person died, they were customarily cremated rather than buried. Thus, she no longer had a body and could only take on her form inside the ghost mistress's coffin. When Chu Wanning had split open the coffin with a whip, Luo Xianxian's soul had lost its shelter and scattered, temporarily unable to reconstitute. That was the reason why the coffin's resentful energy had been strong when closed but faint once opened.

Still, in the illusory realm, why had all the corpses been matched in pairs except for Chen Bohuan, who was matched with a paper ghost bride?

Chu Wanning pondered for a moment before figuring it out: The ghost mistress wouldn't break its own promise. Thus, that ghost bride had been meant to be Luo Xianxian's "corporeal body," or in other words a medium, since only Luo Xianxian could be buried together with Chen Bohuan.

Everything had become clear.

Chu Wanning looked at the helpless girl in the barrier's illusion. He

wanted to say something but didn't know what. The Yuheng Elder really was bad with words; everything he said came out stiff. So the silence stretched on, and he ended up saying nothing at all.

The girl stood in the endless darkness, those soft, round eyes of hers open wide.

Chu Wanning looked at her eyes, and he suddenly didn't have the heart to bear it anymore. He was unable to withstand another glance and wanted to leave. He was just about to open his eyes to leave the Restoration Barrier when the girl spoke.

"Yanluo-gege, th-there's something else I wanted to tell you."

"Mn."

The girl lowered her head and started crying into her hands. Softly, she said, "Yanluo-gege, I don't know what I did afterward, but, I…I really don't want to get my husband killed. I don't want to be a malicious ghost. Really…

"I didn't steal the tangerines, I really am Chen Bohuan's wife, and my whole life, I really, truly never wanted to harm anyone.

"I really didn't want to hurt anyone. Please, I beg you, please believe me." Her wavering voice was broken with sobs. "I…didn't…lie…"

I didn't lie. Why is it that all my life, hardly anyone ever believed me?

She sobbed miserably.

Chu Wanning's voice rang out in the darkness. He didn't say much, but it was without hesitation. "Mn."

Luo Xianxian's small body jolted.

"I believe you," said Chu Wanning.

Luo Xianxian tried to wipe away her tears but couldn't stop crying. In the end, she covered her tear-streaked face with her hands and bowed deeply toward the person in the darkness who she couldn't see.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes. He said nothing for a long while.

Time passed differently inside the barrier than it did in reality. He had been within it for a long time, but it had been a mere instant to those on the

outside. Mo Ran hadn't yet arrived, and the remaining members of the Chen family were watching him apprehensively.

Chu Wanning suddenly put away the willow vine. "I will voice your grievances," he said to Madam Chen. "You can sleep now."

Madam Chen stared blankly at him with bloodred eyes, then collapsed to the ground with a *thud*, unconscious.

Chu Wanning lifted his head again, his gaze sweeping across Landlord Chen's face, then landing on the youngest son. "I will ask one last time." His voice was flat and cold, and he spoke slowly, clearly enunciating each word. "You really don't know whose voice that was?"

Chapter 23:
This Venerable One Couldn't Stop Him

THE YOUNGEST SON quivered uncontrollably, both legs shaking as he looked up at his father.

Landlord Chen's eyes darted left and right. After a while, he insisted, "I d…don't know it. I-I don't recognize it!"

Chu Wanning's face was as cold as frost. His voice was low as he said, "Liar."

Chu Wanning had a severe appearance to begin with. Now, with his eyebrows lowered and his furious aura, he looked even more murderous—even more frightening than a malicious ghost.

Landlord Chen unconsciously took two steps back. Chu Wanning abruptly struck the ground with Tianwen, and sparks danced from the vine as leaves flew into the air. Landlord Chen promptly fell on his ass.

"Was Hundred Butterfly Fragrance really devised by your family? Was your eldest son's marriage his first? Does 'Luo Xianxian' ring a bell? Just how shameless are you, at this ripe old age?!"

Landlord Chen's mouth opened, closed, then opened again, but he couldn't ultimately manage a single word as his face turned from ashen to scarlet.

The young daughter of the Chen family, who had been cowering off to the side this whole time, heard the name "Luo Xianxian" and immediately started crying. She stumbled over to kneel before her mother, shaking that unconscious body. "Luo-jiejie! Luo-jiejie, was it all you? I know you were wronged, and that you can't accept it, but please, I beg you, if only for me, please spare my family… Luo-jiejie…"

Chu Wanning leaned over, Tianwen glowing golden in his hand, and used its hilt to lift Landlord Chen's face. He was a germaphobe and had no inclination whatsoever to touch those whom he already found disgusting. A single graze would give him goosebumps.

“Do you really think I can’t tell when someone’s lying to me?” Chu Wanning asked pitilessly. He stared into Landlord Chen’s face as his own was reflected in those frightened eyes.

It was indeed an unlikable face, cold and harsh, like a blade covered in frost.

And what of it? Yuheng of the Night Sky had no need of affection from other people.

“Daozhang, Daozhang, Sisheng Peak sent you, and I’m the client! How could you pry into my private business like this? I—”

“Fine, I’ll get out of your business, then,” said Chu Wanning. “You can wait to die.”

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait! You can’t—”

“I can’t?” Danger flickered in Chu Wanning’s narrowed eyes. “I can’t what?”

“I’m… You’re… You…”

“If someone like you were a disciple of my sect,” Chu Wanning said as he stroked Tianwen, “I’d whip you bloody and snap your bones right here.”

At this, Landlord Chen finally gave up on trying to play dumb. The sight of Chu Wanning’s vicious demeanor, without a hint of the compassion one would expect from a cultivator, made his legs begin to shake involuntarily. He knelt down, throwing all self-respect out the window as he wailed. “Daozhang, w-we had no other choice. We couldn’t afford to offend the governor’s daughter! We—we were so worried that we could hardly eat, Daozhang—”

While caterwauling, he reached out to cling to Chu Wanning’s thighs.

Chu Wanning’s germaphobia flared. As Landlord Chen was about to touch him, he brought the willow vine down without a second thought, exclaiming in disgust. “Don’t touch me!”

“Aah!” The back of Landlord Chen’s hand was lashed by Tianwen, and even though there was no spiritual energy behind the strike, he howled in pain. “Unbelievable!” the man shouted. “A Sisheng Peak cultivator would strike the commonfolk?!”

"You—!"

When Mo Ran, supporting the two invalids, stepped into the Chen Manor, the sight that greeted him was that of Landlord Chen crying snottily where he knelt on the ground, pointing at Chu Wanning with a shaky finger as he yelled. "Which other sect *does* that? Your Sisheng Peak took the fee, and—and not only did you not protect the client, y-you attacked him instead! It's so, it's so—it's beyond shameless! I-I'm gonna tell everyone! I'll announce it to the world! I-I'll make sure everyone knows about your sect's…your sect's *attitude*! I'll destroy your sect's reputation and make sure you never get paid another copper!"

"So what if you have money?" Chu Wanning snarled. "Does money allow you to flip right and wrong, to repay kindness with cruelty? Does money let you do whatever you want and break all your promises?"

"It's not like we killed that Luo Xianxian," the Chen family's youngest son spoke up timidly from the side. "We just knocked her around a bit and chased her out. She's the one who didn't want to live. It's not our fault she didn't look for shelter from the snow—can you blame us for that? We didn't kill anyone! You can't just point fingers as you please just because you're some mighty cultivator."

His words were extremely crafty. Technically, the Chens hadn't broken any laws; even if Chu Wanning were to drag them to court, at most the official might rebuke them for being heartless and dishonest, but none of them would be convicted of anything.

"Are you trying to claim that just because you didn't kill someone with your own hands, you're not responsible for their death? How convenient for you." Chu Wanning's hand, clenched around the willow vine, shook with anger.

Landlord Chen, that old weasel, had already picked up his wits from where they had been scattered by the initial scare. He had been afraid that Chu Wanning would ditch them without taking care of the ghost, but when he thought about it again, this barbarous daozhang had still been sent by Sisheng Peak. As the foremost sect of the lower cultivation realm, since they'd collected the fee, they would definitely finish the job; that was common knowledge. Once he came to this realization, he stopped being quite so afraid.

He held on to his own hoof, which had sustained a tiny cut, all tears and snot as he cried. “Cleaned up? Us Chens, we’ve never done anything heinous, not murder and not arson. If Luo Xianxian didn’t want to live, how was that any of our fault? I-If you don’t properly exorcise this ghost today, I’ll go to Sisheng Peak right away and file a complaint about you! Who does things like this? If you take someone’s money, you have to take care of their problems. How do you not understand something that basic? And you—”

Before he’d even finished, Chu Wanning took out his own money pouch and threw it on the ground before him, never once blinking. “Your payment to the sect, returned in full. As for complaining, feel free!”

Tianwen glowed brightly, willow leaves sharp as knives.

Caught off guard, Landlord Chen yelped and squealed, covering his head and scurrying about like a rat. In his frenzy, he even dragged his own daughter in front of him to block the lashes.

Luckily, Chu Wanning was a practiced hand at whipping people, and Tianwen was one with his mind. The willow vine snapped back to avoid hitting the Chen daughter before circling around and heading directly for Landlord Chen’s face. In a flash, there was a loud shriek and a spray of blood.

Landlord Chen hadn’t expected Chu Wanning to be so completely unfazed by his posturing, and his air of arrogance instantly melted into a puddle of mud, leaving him scared shitless as he fled and shrieked. “Wait, wait, wait, hold the whip! Hold the whip! Daozhang! Daozhang, I was just talking nonsense! Just nonsense! Ah! Daozhang, spare me! Aiyo, please, I’m begging you! I’m getting on in years—I can’t take this! Daozhang, have mercy, it was our fault! It was our fault!”

Chu Wanning wasn’t even listening to him. His chest was brimming with anger, and his phoenix eyes grimly narrowed as Tianwen danced in the air. Landlord Chen rolled around on the ground in pain, crying messily.

Mo Ran stood at the gate, stunned. He had never seen Chu Wanning whip a commoner with Tianwen before, and so ruthlessly too. It was as if he was whipping a beast—the willow vine moved so fast, it was barely visible.

This kind of behavior was unheard of. Beating up the client, whether in the upper or lower cultivation realm, would without a doubt destroy a

cultivator's reputation for good. No matter how bad Chu Wanning's temper was, or how much he let his heart rule his head, how could he have gone so far as to commit such a huge blunder? This was way more serious than Mo Ran's "thieving and debauchery."

Shi Mei's face was pale from shock. He pulled at Mo Ran in a panic. "H-hurry and stop Shizun!"

Mo Ran handed the still unconscious Madam Chen-Yao—that was, Young Mistress Yao—over to Shi Mei and stepped forward to grab Chu Wanning's wrist. "Shizun—you—what are you doing?" he asked, alarmed and apprehensive.

Chu Wanning was in a terrible mood, and his brow furrowed. "Let go," he bellowed.

"Shizun, this is against the rules—"

"As if I need you to tell me. Which of Sisheng Peak's seven hundred and fifty rules do I not know better than you? Let go!"

Mo Ran raised his voice. "Then why aren't you stopping?"

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting his breath. He abruptly ripped his hand away instead, and another lash landed ruthlessly on Landlord Chen.

"Shizun!"

Chu Wanning growled, eyes frosty. "Get lost!"

Landlord Chen saw that Mo Ran looked handsome and amiable—he definitely had to be a good person. He hurriedly crawled over to cower behind Mo Ran and tug at the hem of his clothing. "Daozhang, please talk to your shizun. I—my old bones—even if I was wrong! Even if I was wrong, my old bones can't take this kind of beating…"

But contrary to his expectations, when Mo Ran turned around and saw his snot- and tear-covered face, he felt not pity but disgust. He moved quickly away with an, "ah," and muttered in disdain, "Don't touch me."

Landlord Chen saw that this man could not be relied upon. His gaze moved on to Shi Mei, who was helping Madam Chen-Yao into a chair not too far away. Holding on to his last bit of hope, he crawled toward Shi Mei, crying and yowling.

“Daozhang, Daozhang, please show some kindness, show some mercy. I know I was wrong—it was my bad, all my bad. Please, I beg you, please talk to your shizun. I was wrong, and I admit my guilt… I… I… I’ll do whatever you say, just please don’t hit me anymore. I’m so old. My body can’t bear it…can’t bear it…”

He cried pitifully, genuinely begging for his life as he crawled to Shi Mei’s side and tugged at his clothes.

Shi Mei was filled with pity and turned to implore Chu Wanning. “Shizun, since the old man already knows he’s in the wrong, please show some mercy and spare—”

“Out of the way,” Chu Wanning cut in.

Shi Mei fell silent.

“Did you not hear me?!” Chu Wanning said severely.

Shi Mei shuddered in fear and moved out of the way.

Tianwen ripped through the air with a *whoosh* and headed directly for Landlord Chen, who covered his head with both arms and let out a frightened cry. The sound was simply too pitiful. Shi Mei couldn’t help but step back in front of him to block the hit.

The lash landed with a resounding *crack*.

Shi Mei had moved too fast. Chu Wanning tried to pull back, but it was too late.

Droplets of blood flew. In his weakened state, the strike sent Shi Mei straight to his knees. He covered his delicate cheek, but he couldn’t stop the blood that trickled out from between his fingers.

Chapter 24:
This Venerable One Declares a Cold War

FOR A MOMENT, everyone was silent. The only sounds were Landlord Chen's sobs.

Shi Mei's head was lowered, his hand covering his cheek, but when he looked up at Chu Wanning, his gaze was earnest and sincere. "Shizun, please stop this. If you keep going, it'll be Sisheng Peak that bears the blame…"

Mo Ran's soul was about to fly out of his mouth. He might have been a reprobate, but he was a reprobate who was utterly devoted to Shi Mei. In this reborn life, he had sworn to himself to treat Shi Mei carefully and to protect him well, yet it had only been a couple of days and already Shi Mei had been injured and lashed. How could this be?!

He couldn't even be bothered to settle the score with Chu Wanning at present. Instead he hurried to Shi Mei's side to check the wound on his cheek.

"I'm okay…" Shi Mei said softly.

"Let me see anyway."

"It's really nothing."

Shi Mei tried to resist, but Mo Ran managed to pull away the hand covering his wound.

His pupils instantly contracted. It was a deep gash, raw and bloody, stretching all the way to his neck. Shi Mei's blood still ran from it.

Mo Ran saw red. He bit his lip and glared for a long time before whipping around to yell at Chu Wanning. "Are you quite done yet?!"

Chu Wanning, face dour, was silent. He did not apologize or approach, only stood there rooted to the same spot, holding Tianwen—though it remained dormant, no spiritual energy channeled into it.

Mo Ran felt like there were countless frenzied demons in his chest. Who could tolerate seeing their beloved person, who had died once in a past life, suffering time and again like this?

He and Chu Wanning stared each other down, neither backing down, neither giving in. Mo Ran's eyes began to grow bloodshot; he'd hated Chu Wanning for so many years that the hatred had seeped all the way into the marrow of his bones. Why was this person *always* in his way?!

Back when Mo Ran had first joined the sect, he had done something wrong and nearly been whipped to death by Chu Wanning. Later, when Shi Mei had been badly injured, even though he was one of only three disciples Chu Wanning had ever taken in his life, Chu Wanning had merely stood by without lifting a finger. Later still, after Shi Mei's death, after Sisheng Peak had been destroyed, Mo Weiyu had become the sole overlord of the cultivation world, and every person under the sun groveled before him.

Only Chu Wanning had stood against him, and he had done so at every turn, getting in his way left and right, stabbing him in the conscience—a constant reminder that no matter how mighty an emperor Taxian-jun became, underneath it all he was just a lunatic who had been abandoned by all those closest to him.

Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning… In life and in death, it was always him!

The two of them were still dressed in matching wedding robes, red and red, face-to-face, but it was as if the space between them was split by a gaping chasm.

Finally, Chu Wanning put Tianwen away.

Landlord Chen let out a massive sigh of relief and knelt in front of Shi Mei, kowtowing nonstop. "So kind, so kind. Xianjun is truly a living buddha, truly our savior. Thank you for saving my entire family, Xianjun. Thank you, Xianjun. Thank you, Xianjun."

It always ended like this.

Chu Wanning would be the one to take care of an evil spirit, but he would also be the one who dealt out vicious lashes thereafter. Chu Wanning did what he was supposed to, but also what he wasn't supposed to, and after everything, someone else would be the compassionate savior and he the villain. It had always been this way.

Chu Wanning knew that he was ill-tempered, so he was resigned to this. He didn't regret it either.

Of course he felt bad about having accidentally struck his own disciple, but he had a thin face and couldn't bring himself to go up and say some warm, gentle words. Instead he walked away and went to stand before the young daughter of the Chen family.

The little girl looked at him and subconsciously stepped back in fear, quivering.

Of the entire Chen family, she was the only one with any kindness. Chu Wanning softened his tone as he spoke. "Your mother suffered ghost possession, and her lifespan has been reduced by at least twenty years. If she doesn't repent and continues being immoral, she will be plagued by negative energy and die even sooner. When she wakes, tell her to handcraft a memorial tablet for Miss Luo using red peachwood and to clearly acknowledge her status from thereon. Luo Xianxian was Chen Bohuan's properly wedded wife; to fulfill her dying wish, the fact that your family has kept this hidden for years must also be made public."

He paused, then handed her a scripture book.

"Additionally, your whole family must kneel and recite the Incantation of Deliverance three times a day to help Miss Luo's soul find peace and purge the spirits haunting your family. This must be done for ten years without stop, or Miss Luo will return for vengeance."

"Yes." The little girl's voice shook. "Th-thank you, Daozhang…"

Chu Wanning turned to glare at Landlord Chen and his son, gaze sharp as a snow-covered dagger. "When Madam Chen-Yao awakens, the two of you must tell her everything and let her make her own decision. If you try to hide anything at all, I'll rip out both your tongues!"

These two were no more than posturing cowards who dared not put up any resistance now that things had come to this point. They prostrated themselves on the ground, swearing up and down to follow his every instruction.

"As for Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, it was created by Mr. Luo alone, but you shamelessly claimed it as your own formula. You know what you have to do; I will waste no more breath on you." Chu Wanning shook out his sleeves and made to leave.

"W-we'll definitely go make corrections to our store's claims and

clarify that this fragrance was devised by…by Mr. Luo…”

After everything was taken care of, Chu Wanning instructed Mo Ran to take Madam Chen-Yao inside so as to draw out the poison within her.

Although Mo Ran held hatred in his heart, he knew well that in his youth he had been more respectful than defiant toward his shizun, so he didn’t protest. He only squeezed Shi Mei’s hand and whispered, “Go take care of your face and stop the bleeding. I’ll take her inside.”

There was still a big red Xi character hung in the eldest Chen son’s room. Everything had happened so fast that they’d probably forgotten to take it down in their rush. At this time, with Chen Bohuan already nothing more than powder, it seemed like a profound mockery.

Madam Chen-Yao was collateral damage in this ridiculous, avarice-riddled farce. What would she choose to do when she woke?

As a commoner, she wasn’t as tenacious as Shi Mei. Chu Wanning drew out the poisoned blood and fed her a pill in silence. The whole time, Mo Ran stood to the side holding a basin of water and handing over towels, but the two of them did not speak to one another—did not so much as look at one another.

As he was leaving, Chu Wanning’s indifferent gaze swept past the wall before catching on something. He took a closer look at the poem hanging on it. The columns of letters were written in regular script, neat and upright; the ink hadn’t been dry for long, and the edges of the paper had not yet begun to yellow.

Written on it was:

Pair of rosy soft hands, jug of wine sealed in yellow;

Verdant spring throughout the city, willow swaying behind the palace walls.

Harsh eastern gales, happiness short-lived;

One cup of melancholy, many years of solitude.

This is wrong, wrong, wrong.

Spring returns lovely still, figures wasting away;

Tear trails from reddened eyes, silken handkerchief soaked through.

Falling peach blossoms, empty pavilion upon the pond;

Vows of affection enduring, letters of love unsent.

All that remains is nothing, nothing, nothing.

Chu Wanning's heart felt suddenly heavy. The writing was neat and careful, and it was signed "Chen Bohuan." The three characters of his name were glaringly conspicuous.

Chen-gongzi had married the daughter of the Yao family against his own wishes, and he had been forced to keep the misery in his heart to himself. Had he spent the final days of his life standing by the window, brush in hand, helpless to do anything but transcribe *Chai Tou Feng*,[16] an ode to loss and partings?

Chu Wanning didn't want to remain at the Chen Manor even a moment longer. Ignoring the searing pain in his shoulder, he turned and left.

Chu Wanning and Shi Mei were both injured and unfit to ride back to Sisheng Peak straightaway. Moreover, Chu Wanning especially disliked traveling by sword, and so they decided to spend the night at an inn. This way, they could also go take a look at the temple the next day, to ensure that things would be properly taken care of.

Even though the demons and corpses had been pulverized by Chu Wanning's Wind technique, it was only their bodies that had been destroyed, not their spirits. There was no harm in staying a few days to make sure that nothing had slipped off to continue causing trouble.

Chu Wanning walked ahead in silence, his two disciples following behind him.

Shi Mei seemed to have remembered something. "A-Ran, the clothes you and Shizun are wearing… What… What's going on?"

Mo Ran was taken aback before realizing that he and their shizun were still wearing wedding robes. He was deathly afraid that Shi Mei might misunderstand and hurriedly made to take them off. "This…um, the illusion

from before—don't think too much of it, I…"

Halfway through his words, he took another look and realized that, since Shi Mei had also been dragged through the ghost wedding, he too was wearing wedding robes. It was just that his had a different design and didn't look too recognizable, due to the rips and tears. But no matter what, they were wedding robes.

Standing side by side with Shi Mei like this, he could imagine that it was Shi Mei whose hands he had held back in the ghost mistress's illusion, with whom he had bowed, with whom he had shared wine. Suddenly, he didn't want to take the robes off anymore, and he could only stare at Shi Mei in a daze.

Shi Mei smiled warmly. "What is it? You didn't finish your sentence."

"It's nothing," Mo Ran mumbled.

Chu Wanning was a few steps ahead of them. It was unclear how much he'd heard, but he stopped and turned around.

The sky was starting to brighten. After a night of commotion, the first light of daybreak emerged over the horizon, the sun crimson like a torn and bleeding heart struggling out from the dark abyss to paint the skies in splendid color.

Chu Wanning stood, backlit, as the end of the long night grew bright, as the rising sun lit the clouds. He stood in profile, his wedding robes red like blood. The sunrise cast a golden halo behind him, blurring the expression on his face.

Spiritual energy surged forth, ripping his wedding robes to pieces. Fragments of red fluttered like so many petals of wilting haitang blossoms. The wind picked up, scattering the pieces everywhere. The white robes beneath fluttered in the wind along with his inky black hair.

Blood on his shoulder. Pieces of fabric in the wind.

The bloodstain where he had been injured while he protected Mo Ran was all the more vivid and conspicuous on those white robes.

A long while passed before Chu Wanning sneered austerely, as if in ridicule. "Mo Weiyu, what is there between you and me to be misunderstood?"

“Mo Weiyu” was what he called Mo Ran when he was angry, the term of address cold and unfamiliar, distant with not a hint of warmth.

Mo Ran choked, caught unawares, and had nothing to say.

Chu Wanning turned and walked away. There was no one around at this hour; he walked ahead by himself as the earth and sky seemed to blur together.

His harsh, contemptuous look fell apart as soon as he arrived at the inn room and closed the door. Chu Wanning gritted his teeth, pain clear on his face as he lifted a hand to touch his shoulder.

The ghost mistress’s body was a kind of celestial form, her claws no lesser than Tianwen; both were extremely powerful weapons. His entire shoulder was torn up, but there had been no time to take care of it during the demonic onslaught. By this point, it had become infected and was beginning to fester. The pain was unbearable.

As he stood in the room, Chu Wanning exhaled slowly and tried to take off his robes, but the fabric stuck to his skin where the blood had already dried. The tug sent bolts of pain through his body.

Mo Ran’s room was right next door. The inn was hardly soundproof, and Chu Wanning didn’t want anyone to know, so he bit down on his lip and ripped the cloth off in one ruthless motion.

“Ngh…!” Chu Wanning let out a stifled grunt, then slowly let go, blood on his teeth and lips where he had bitten too hard. He gasped for breath, his face completely devoid of color, his body covered in cold sweat.

He lowered his long lashes, which trembled slightly as he looked down to take in the damage. It wasn’t too bad. Still manageable.

Holding on to the table for support, he slowly lowered himself into the chair. Bit by bit, swallowing the pain, he wiped the wound clean with his uninjured hand, using the water and towel he had instructed the inn’s attendant to bring.

Then, with a sharp knife, he cut away the dead flesh. After that, he applied a salve made by Madam Wang. Finally, slowly, and with great difficulty, he wrapped the bandages around his shoulder by himself.

He wasn’t used to showing weakness in front of others. He had gone

through this kind of pain many times before, and every time he had gotten through it on his own.

An injured animal would find a place to hide and lick its wounds. Sometimes Chu Wanning felt like he was no different from those beasts, and that this solitary existence would probably continue into the future as well. He knew he was unlikable, so he didn't want to beg pitifully for anyone's help. He had his dignity.

But when he took off his robes, a brocade pouch fell to the floor. The red satin was embroidered with flowers of the silk tree. His fingers shook from the pain as he slowly opened it. Inside were two locks of hair, corded together.

His and Mo Ran's.

Chu Wanning's mind went blank for a moment. He wanted to hold the pouch to the candle flame and burn it, along with its ridiculous contents. But even after a time, he couldn't bear to do so.

Entwining their hair, new husband and wife / Ensure their love shall ne'er be unwound. He could almost hear the golden boy and jade maiden's quiet giggles.

Chu Wanning was aware of the throbbing deep in his own heart and loathed himself all the more for it. He clenched the soft pouch tightly in his hand and slowly closed his eyes.

He couldn't accept these feelings, which he had long held toward Mo Ran. His only wish was that he could dig out his own heart and cut out the despicable thoughts inside—tear, rend, and throw them away.

Where was his decency, his propriety? Was Mo Weiyu someone he ought to think about in such ways? What kind of a teacher *was* he? Truly he was worse than a beast!

Tap tap tap.

All of a sudden, several knocks came from the door. Chu Wanning was in the middle of berating himself and startled, his eyes opening wide as he hurriedly tucked the brocade pouch away in his sleeve. His face settled back into an ill-tempered cast.

"Who is it?"

“Shizun, it’s me.” Mo Ran’s voice came from the outside, and Chu Wanning’s heartbeat sped up a little. “Can I come in?”

Chapter 25:
This Venerable One Really Can't Stand Him!

CHU WANNING WAS SILENT for a long while, his face full of doom and gloom. For the entirety of that silence, the words "get the hell out" were stuck in his throat until, at length, they reluctantly came out as, "Get the hell in."

"Eh? Your door isn't locked?" Mo Ran was trying to make up with him after an entire day of playing cold war, so he pushed the door open and strolled in as if nothing was wrong.

Chu Wanning glanced at him from where he sat by the table, no emotion on his face. If he spoke honestly from the heart, Mo Ran was indeed good-looking; he brightened the whole room with his mere presence. The youth's supple skin almost seemed to glow, and the corners of his lips held a natural curve, such that he looked like he was smiling even when his mouth had a neutral set.

Chu Wanning kept his composure firmly under control as he moved his gaze away from Mo Ran and lowered his long lashes, raising a hand to extinguish the stick of incense on the table. "What are you doing here?" he asked impassively.

"I came to…check on your injury." Mo Ran cleared his throat, then his gaze landed on Chu Wanning's shoulder and he paused. "You've already taken care of it?"

"Mn," Chu Wanning said mildly.

Mo Ran was speechless.

It was true that he held a grudge against Chu Wanning, and that he was also mad at him for hurting Shi Mei. But Mo Ran had calmed down, and it wasn't like he didn't have any conscience at all; hate was one thing, but he hadn't forgotten how Chu Wanning's shoulder had been injured.

Inside that stifling coffin, Chu Wanning had held him tightly in his arms and used his own body to block the ghost mistress's claws. He had refused to let go even as his whole body shook from the pain…

Mo Ran definitely loathed Chu Wanning. But for some reason, a bunch of other complicated feelings were always mixed in with that loathing.

He was a crude person who had not received an education in his youth. Even though he'd studied and somewhat made up for it later on, he had a hard time wrapping his head around many more delicate matters, especially those relating to emotions.

For example, when it came to Chu Wanning, Mo Ran had scratched his head and mulled it over for a long time, but he just couldn't figure out what emotion he felt toward him. He only recognized simple feelings: like, dislike, hate, happiness, unhappiness. But if several emotions blended together, they would give the brilliant and powerful Emperor Taxian-jun vertigo, making him see stars.

I don't get it! It makes no sense. What is this? Save me! Ow, my head.

So Mo Ran simply didn't bother to think about it; he didn't care to waste that kind of energy on anyone but Shi Mei.

Inwardly, he put the earlier incident on Chu Wanning's tab and secretly plotted to repay him twice over whenever he got the chance to settle the score. But at the same time, he felt guilty. He'd warred internally with himself before ultimately knocking on Chu Wanning's door.

He didn't want to owe him anything.

But Chu Wanning was even more headstrong than he had thought. Mo Ran stared at the pile of bloodstained bandages on the table, the crimson-colored water in the washing bowl, and the knife that had been casually tossed aside, bits of bloody flesh clinging to its tip. He felt a headache coming on.

Just how had Chu Wanning managed to treat his own injury? Had he really just cut unblinkingly into the dead flesh around his wound with his own hand, just like that? Mo Ran's scalp went numb just thinking about it. Was this guy even human?

He thought about how, when he'd cleaned Shi Mei's wound earlier, Shi Mei had whimpered softly from the pain, tears springing to his eyes. For all that Mo Ran disliked Chu Wanning, he couldn't help but mentally bow to him.

The Yuheng Elder was indeed boss as fuck. Impressive, truly impressive.

Mo Ran stood there for a bit, then broke the silence first. He lightly coughed twice, toeing the floor, and mumbled awkwardly, “Earlier, at the Chen Manor… Sorry, Shizun.”

Chu Wanning said nothing.

Mo Ran stole a glance at him. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

Chu Wanning continued to ignore him, face indifferent as always. He’d never have said it, but deep inside, he did feel wronged.

Mo Ran walked over. Only up close did he see that Chu Wanning had made a mess of the bandaging, the gauze wrapped around his shoulder like he was tying a crab for market.

Then again, what could he expect from someone who didn’t even know how to do his own laundry?

Mo Ran sighed. “Shizun, don’t be mad anymore.”

“Which of your eyeballs saw me being mad?” Chu Wanning shot back angrily.

Mo Ran wisely kept his mouth shut. Moments passed.

“Shizun, that’s not how you bandage wounds…”

Another tart retort. “You think you know better than me?”

Mo Ran stayed silent, but lifted his hand, wanting to redo the bandages for Chu Wanning. Then he looked at his expression and hesitated again. He had gauged the probability of getting slapped in the face for daring to touch him—it was quite high. The hand lowered, then raised. This repeated several times.

Chu Wanning grew irritated and shot him a sideways glare. “What, you wanna hit me or something?”

Mo Ran did indeed want to hit him, but not right now. He grinned in exasperation and reached out to press his hand against Chu Wanning’s shoulder, consequences be damned. Dimples appeared on his cheeks. “Here, Shizun, I’ll help you redo the bandages.”

Chu Wanning at first wanted to refuse, but Mo Ran's warm fingers were already on him, and his mouth suddenly felt excessively dry. His lips moved slightly, but in the end, he said nothing and just let Mo Ran do as he wanted.

Mo Ran unwrapped the gauze, layer by layer, each layer soaked through with blood, until the five spine-chilling holes were revealed. The mere sight of them made Mo Ran shudder; this damage was much worse than the cut on Shi Mei's face.

Mo Ran stared for a bit, and then, for some reason even he himself did not understand, asked softly, "Does it hurt?"

Chu Wanning, long lashes downcast, only said lightly, "Not too much."

"I'll be gentle," said Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning didn't know where his own mind was going, but his earlobes turned a bit red and he got mad at himself again, thinking he must be losing his mind to be entertaining such absurdities. His expression grew even stiffer, his mood even worse, and he muttered dryly, "Do as you will."

The candle flame crackled. By its dim yellow light, Mo Ran could see that the medicinal salve hadn't even been applied to some parts of the wound. He was sincerely speechless. It could only be by some kind of miracle that Chu Wanning had managed to live to this day.

"Shizun."

"Hm?"

"What happened at the Chen Manor today? Why did you beat them up?" Mo Ran asked while applying the salve.

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment before answering. "I was angry, that's all."

"What made you so angry?" Mo Ran asked.

Chu Wanning didn't feel like bothering with his junior right now, so he kept the tale brief as he told Mo Ran about Luo Xianxian.

Mo Ran shook his head when the account was complete. "That was silly of you. Something like that, no matter how mad it makes you—you still

shouldn't have confronted them in that way. If it was me, I'd just make some stuff up, fake the exorcism, then dust my hands and leave. Let things run their course. You gotta adjust for the situation sometimes, you know. Look at you, making such a big mess over some worthless wretch. And you even accidentally hit Shi Mei—"

Mo Ran caught himself halfway through the rant. He shut up and watched Chu Wanning. He had been too focused on doing the bandages and had forgotten himself for a moment there, unwittingly speaking to Chu Wanning in the impudent tone of his thirty-two-year-old self.

Chu Wanning had clearly noticed it too. He was glaring inhospitably at Mo Ran from the corner of his eye, the gaze alone conveying that familiar line: *I'm going to whip you to death.*

"Erm…"

He was still scrambling to think of an excuse when Chu Wanning spoke first. He said impassively, "Do you think I wanted to hit Shi Mingjing?"

As soon as Shi Mei was mentioned, reason left Mo Ran's brain and willfulness took over. Even his tone grew prickly. "Did you not hit him?"

Chu Wanning regretted the strike too, but his face was thin, and he was mortified, so he scowled and said nothing.

Chu Wanning was headstrong, Mo Ran was lovestruck, and sparks flew where their glares collided in midair. The atmosphere, which had only just eased up a bit, once again left them at a hopeless impasse.

"It's not like Shi Mei did anything wrong," said Mo Ran. "Shizun, can't you at least apologize for accidentally hurting him?"

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you questioning me?"

"No…" Mo Ran paused. "I'm just upset that he was wrongfully injured but didn't even get a 'sorry' from Shizun."

Under the candlelight, the handsome youth finished dressing Chu Wanning's wounds and carefully tied a knot. The scene still seemed somewhat as tender as it had a moment ago, but by now, their moods vastly differed. This was especially true for Chu Wanning, who felt like an entire jar

of vinegar had toppled over inside his chest. The sour taste of jealousy swelled without stopping, seeping under his skin.

Sorry? How do you even write sorry? Someone more apologetic, please teach me.

"It's gonna take at least half a year for that cut on his face to fade," Mo Ran continued. "But earlier, when I was helping him apply medicine, he still said not to blame you. Shizun, it's true that he doesn't think you're at fault, but even so, do you really think you're in the right?"

His words only added fuel to the fire. Chu Wanning tried and failed to bear it. He growled in a low voice, "Get the hell out."

Mo Ran fell silent.

"Out!" Chu Wanning snapped.

Mo Ran was thrown out, the door slamming in his face and nearly on his fingers. His hackles rose too. Look at that, just look! What was Chu Wanning's problem? It was just an apology! That face of his sure was precious—how hard was it to simply say sorry? Even this venerable Emperor Taxian-jun knew to apologize, but the mere Beidou Immortal had to go and throw a hissy fit for no goddamn reason!

No wonder no one wanted him, despite his handsome face! A fucking waste was what it was. He was gonna be single for life, and it served him right!

Chu Wanning had closed the door in the face of the high and mighty Taxian-jun, Emperor of the Mortal Realm, and paid him no heed. Obviously he wouldn't just roll around outside the door like some shameless mutt. He was extremely persistent, clingy like sticky candy and impossible to peel off —but the one he clung to was not his shizun, but Shi Mei.

He couldn't have cared less, and he immediately left to go keep Shi Mei company.

"Back already?" The Beauty Shi Mei[17] was lying down to rest when Mo Ran came in. He paused before sitting up, long black hair draping down his body. "How is Shizun?"

"He's just fine, and so is his temper."

Shi Mei was quiet.

Mo Ran pulled up a chair and straddled it backward, hands propped on its back, an indolent smile playing on his lips as he took in the sight of Shi Mei with his long, soft hair loose.

"Maybe I should go check on him after all…" said Shi Mei.

"Nah, don't do that to yourself." Mo Ran rolled his eyes. "He's pitching a fit right now."

"Did you make him mad again?"

"Does he need someone else to make him mad? He can even get mad at himself. The guy's probably made of wood—he catches fire at the slightest spark."

Shi Mei shook his head, caught between laughing and crying.

"Go back to sleep," said Mo Ran. "I'm gonna go downstairs and borrow the kitchen to cook something for you guys."

"Going to so much trouble?" Shi Mei asked. "You were up all night too. Shouldn't you sleep?"

"Ha ha, I'm plenty awake." Mo Ran laughed. "But if you don't want me to leave yet, I can keep you company till you fall asleep?"

Shi Mei hurriedly waved a hand. "No need," he said gently. "I won't be able to sleep with you here watching. You should try to get some rest too; don't push yourself."

Mo Ran was a little dejected, and the smile on his lips went a little stiff.

Shi Mei was kind to him, yet he always seemed to maintain a certain indiscernible distance. Shi Mei was right in front of him, but he was also like the illusion of the moon in a mirror, a flower reflected in water, in sight but unattainable.

"Okay." Mo Ran did his best to cheer up, forcing the smile back onto his face. He had a radiant smile, and he was silly to the point of being cute when he wasn't being mischievous. "Just call out if you need anything. I'll be right next door, or if not I'll be downstairs."

"Mn."

Mo Ran lifted a hand, wanting to pat Shi Mei's hair. He managed to

restrain himself and turned his hand back around to scratch his own head instead. “I’m off, then.”

Once outside, Mo Ran couldn’t resist a sneeze. He sniffled. Butterfly Town specialized in producing fragrances, and incense of all kinds was quite cheap, so the inn wasn’t stingy about it. Long sticks of specialty incense burned in every room: one to keep out evil spirits, another to remove moisture, and a third to make the rooms smell nice. The smell of incense made Mo Ran uncomfortable, but Shi Mei liked it, so he dealt with it.

Downstairs, Mo Ran swaggered over to the innkeeper and slid him a silver ingot, his eyes squinted in a smile. “Hey, innkeeper, do me a favor.”

At the sight of the silver ingot, the innkeeper’s smile grew even more courteous. “What does the good Xianjun need?”

“I don’t see many people here for breakfast anyway, so can I trouble you to turn away the other guests and lend me the kitchen for the morning?” Mo Ran asked.

How many coppers was a breakfast worth? Even half a month’s worth of breakfast wouldn’t earn a single silver ingot. The innkeeper agreed eagerly, all smiles as he led Mo Weiyu, still swaggering, to the inn’s kitchen.

“Is Xianjun going to cook himself? Why not have our chef take care of it? He’s really good.”

“No need.” Mo Ran grinned. “Have you heard of the House of Drunken Jade in Xiangtan?”

“Ah…the famed pleasure house that burned down a little over a year ago?”

“Mm-hmm.”

The innkeeper peeked outside to make sure his wife was busy with work and not listening in before giving him a sneaky grin. “Who hasn’t heard of that place? It was the most famous establishment on the Xiang River, and it even produced a well-known courtesan whose name spread far and wide. Too bad it’s so far away, or I’d go listen to her play too.”

Mo Ran laughed. “Well, thanks for the compliment, on her behalf.”

“On her behalf? On her behalf?” The innkeeper was puzzled. “You know her or something?”

“More than just know her,” Mo Ran replied.

“Wow…wouldn’t have known that just looking at you, eh? But can you cultivators even…uh…”

Mo Ran cut him off with a laugh. “Besides the courtesan, do you know anything else?”

“Um…I heard the food there was also unparalleled.”

Mo Ran’s lips curved into a cheery grin as he picked up the kitchen knife with an air of familiarity. “Before I was a cultivator, I worked as an assistant in the kitchens at the House of Drunken Jade for many years. Who do you think cooks better, me or your chef?”

The innkeeper was even more amazed, stumbling over his words. “Xianjun is truly…truly…” He kept mumbling “truly” but couldn’t find the words.

Mo Ran glanced at him sidelong, with a smug smile on his face and an air of self-assured laziness. “All right, out you go, then. This venerable chef is gonna get to work.”

The innkeeper had no idea he was currently speaking to the ex-Lord of Darkness, and shamelessly implored, “I’ve long heard about the delicacies at the House of Drunken Jade. Perhaps when Xianjun is done, this lowly one might ask to try some?”

He thought it was a small request and that Mo Ran would definitely agree. Who could have guessed that Mo Ran’s eyes would squint in an impish smile? “You wanna try?”

“Yeah!”

“Keep dreaming!” Mo Ran hmphed with an air of arrogance. “Did you think this venerable one was gonna cook for just anyone?” he muttered. “This is for Shi Mei. If not for him, this venerable one wouldn’t even step into the kitchen…”

He picked out a radish and started cutting it as he continued muttering to himself.

Thus shot down, the innkeeper could only stand awkwardly to the side, rubbing his hands and simpering for a while before quietly slipping away.

He also muttered to himself on the inside. What was all that with “this venerable one”? The boy was so young; he probably hadn’t even formed a spiritual core yet. When you listened to him rambling on, it was, “shimei this,” “shimei that,” but there hadn’t been a single girl in his group.

The innkeeper rolled his eyes. The boy had to be crazy, and not just a *little* crazy.

Mo Ran busied himself in the kitchen for four whole hours; it was nearly noon before he finished. He ran upstairs expectantly to wake up Shi Mei. His footsteps slowed as he passed Chu Wanning’s room. Should he call him to eat too…?

When he recalled Chu Wanning’s nasty temper, Mo Ran frowned in distaste.

Nope. He’d only made a little bit anyway. None for Chu Wanning!

Chapter 26:
This Venerable One's First Meeting With Him

THE SUN CLIMBED HIGHER in the sky, and more and more people came by the inn to eat. Mo Ran found it too noisy downstairs, so he had the attendant bring the dishes he'd made up to his room.

In the end, he'd invited Chu Wanning as well. Mo Ran was no Emperor of the Mortal Realm for now, and his shizun was therefore the highest-ranking person present, so he had to play by the rules.

Three bowls of piping hot noodle soup sat on the square beech table. The smooth, chewy noodles had been handmade by Mo Ran himself and were much better than what you could buy anywhere else in town. Thick-cut slices of beef were piled on top, along with fried sausage, fresh and tender pea shoots, plump napa cabbage, and golden-yellow egg floss, the colorful ingredients artfully arranged.

But the most noteworthy thing was not the succulent greens, the generous cuts of meat, or even the abundance of ingredients—it was the broth that had been simmered on a low fire for four hours. The milky white broth had a layer of sesame chili oil on top; Mo Ran had ground the hot, numbing spices himself in a stone mortar and pestle, and he had simmered them with the broth to produce a rich taste and tantalizing aroma.

He had used copious amounts of both chili oil and peppers, thinking about Shi Mei's love of spicy foods. As he watched Shi Mei dig in with relish, Mo Ran's grin stretched even wider. He stole a few glances and couldn't resist asking, "Is it good?"

"It's delicious," said Shi Mei.

Chu Wanning said nothing, his face as grim as it always was, looking as though the heavens owed him a hundred mountains of gold and silver.

Mo Ran was quite pleased with himself. "Then just let me know whenever you want to eat it again. I'll make it for you."

Shi Mei's eyes watered from the spiciness when he looked up to smile at Mo Ran, his features gentle. Faced with such a beauty, if it weren't for Chu

Wanning sitting nearby and freezing half the room with his mere presence, it might have been difficult for Mo Ran to decide between eating the noodles in his bowl or eating Shi Mei.

Shi Mei didn't eat much of the pea shoots and sausage, but the beef and cabbage were quickly gone. Mo Ran, who had been watching quietly from the side, reached out with his chopsticks and moved the pea shoots and sausage into his own bowl, then moved several pieces of beef from his bowl into Shi Mei's.

Sisheng Peak's disciples all ate at Mengpo Hall, often exchanging dishes with one another, so Shi Mei smiled and thought nothing of it. "A-Ran doesn't like beef?"

"Mm-hmm, I like pea shoots." Then he started chowing down. The tips of his ears were a little red.

Chu Wanning impassively picked out the pea shoots in his bowl and tossed all of them into Mo Ran's bowl. "I don't like pea shoots." He also tossed all the beef in his bowl into Shi Mei's. "I also don't like beef."

Then he stared at the rest of the food in his bowl with a furrowed brow, pressed his lips together, and said nothing.

"Shizun…is it not to your taste?" Shi Mei asked carefully.

Chu Wanning didn't respond, only lowered his head and silently picked up a piece of cabbage, taking a small bite. His expression instantly grew worse, and he put his chopsticks down with a smack. "Mo Weiyu, did you spill an entire jar of hot sauce into the soup?"

Mo Ran paused and looked up, a noodle dangling from his mouth. He hadn't anticipated that the breakfast he had worked so hard on would receive such harsh criticism. He blinked at Chu Wanning, bewildered, unable to believe his own ears for a moment, before slurping down the noodle in his mouth. "Wha—?"

Chu Wanning was even less courteous this time. "Is this even food for people? Is it even edible?"

Mo Ran blinked several more times before it finally clicked that this prick Chu Wanning was roasting him. "How is it not food for people?" he shot back indignantly.

The space between Chu Wanning's eyebrows twitched. "It's utterly unpalatable."

Mo Ran choked. Whatever anyone said, his skills had indeed been sneakily learned from the best of the best at the House of Drunken Jade. "Shizun, aren't you being…a little too picky?"

Shi Mei also piped up. "Shizun, you haven't eaten for a whole day. Even if you don't like it, you should still try to eat some."

Chu Wanning stood up and said coldly, "I don't eat spicy foods."

Then he turned and left.

The two left at the table fell into an awkward silence.

Shi Mei was dumbfounded. "Shizun doesn't eat spicy foods? How come I didn't know that? A-Ran, did you know this?"

"I…" Mo Ran stared blankly for a while at the noodles that Chu Wanning had left basically untouched, then nodded. "Mn. I didn't know."

That was a lie. Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning couldn't eat spicy food. It was just that he'd forgotten.

He had been entangled with this person for the greater part of his previous life, after all. He knew exactly what foods Chu Wanning liked and disliked. But he hadn't bothered to keep those details in mind, so he hadn't remembered.

Chu Wanning returned to his room and lay down, still dressed. He faced the wall with his eyes wide open, unable to sleep. Between how much blood he'd lost, the spiritual energy he'd expended, and the fact that he hadn't had a single bite to eat since the day before, he felt awful.

The man didn't know how to take care of himself at all. He was in a bad mood, so he simply didn't eat, as if he could fill his stomach with anger instead. He didn't know what he was angry about. Or rather, he didn't want to know.

But in the silence, a face appeared before his unfocused eyes, lip corners curled softly into a spirited smile, light flickering in a pair of clear, black eyes that were gentle with a hint of purple. Warm and comfortable, and somewhat lazy.

Chu Wanning gripped the blanket, finger joints going white from the strength of his grip. He didn't want to sink into the vision, and he closed his eyes in an attempt to escape that face and its careless laughter. But the past surged forth even more strongly with his eyes closed, and it washed over him like a tide…

The first time he met Mo Ran had been in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower on Sisheng Peak. The sun was fierce that day, and all twenty elders were present, talking amongst themselves in low voices.

The Yuheng Elder was an exception, naturally. He wasn't so foolish as to stand over there with the rest of them to bake in the sun. Instead, he stood under a flowering tree by himself, preoccupied with examining the flexibility of the newly made black metal claw on his hand.

Of course, he himself had no need for such things; he was forging these claws for the lower-level disciples of Sisheng Peak.

The lower cultivation realm bordered the ghost realm, and so it was often dangerous to traverse. It wasn't uncommon for the lower-level disciples to get injured or to even lose their lives. Chu Wanning never said anything about it, but he had been trying to work out a solution; he wanted to make a weapon that was light, nimble, and easy to learn.

The others stood to the side, chattering.

"Did you hear? That long-lost nephew of the sect leader was barely saved from a fire. No one else survived when the place burned down. If the sect leader had been even a step slower, his nephew probably would've turned to ash, too. It was truly a stroke of luck."

"Must've been his late father protecting him from the other side. It's heartbreaking that he was separated so young and went through so many hardships… Ah…"

"The child's name is Mo Ran? He's fifteen years old, right? It's time for him to receive a courtesy name then. Does he have one?"

"Xuanji Elder, the child grew up in a brothel; he's lucky to even have a name, much less a courtesy name."

"I heard the sect leader already thought of a couple and is just choosing

between them now. Wonder what he's going to pick in the end."

"The sect leader sure does value this nephew of his."

"You don't say? It isn't just the sect leader either; even the madam dotes on him endlessly. Heh, probably the only person in the entire Sisheng Peak who's displeased is our very own darling of the heavens—"

"Tanlang Elder! You mustn't speak with such indiscretion!"

"Ha ha, my mistake, I slipped! But our darling of the heavens runs wild and pays little mind to propriety, disrespects his elders, and lazes about idly all day with an air of born entitlement. He really does lack discipline."

"Tanlang Elder, how much have you had to drink today…?" The person at his side gave him a meaningful look, gesturing with his chin toward Chu Wanning, who was standing a distance away. The implication was obvious.

The darling of the heavens, Xue Meng, was Chu Wanning's disciple. To say that Xue Meng lacked discipline was to indirectly insult Chu Wanning's instruction.

The Yuheng Elder was composed and refined in appearance, as if he was above the matters of the mortal realm and graced with a lofty air. But everyone knew about his volatile temperament; if anyone rubbed him the wrong way, they might as well just wash their neck clean and wait for death by whipping.

Chu Wanning heard every word of their gossip, but he paid them no mind. He had far more interest in the decorative patterns on the metal claw on his finger than he did in what others had to say about him.

Speaking of which, the finger claw was pretty good, but it wasn't quite tough enough. There were some demons whose thick hides it might not be able to rip through, not in one strike. He would try adding some dragon-bone powder when he got back; that would help.

When the other elders saw Chu Wanning neglect to react, they relaxed a little and resumed their chatter.

"The sect leader probably summoned all of us here today in order to pick a teacher for that Mo-gongzi, huh?"

"That's strange. Why doesn't the sect leader teach the boy himself?"

“Supposedly, his little nephew’s aptitude is incompatible with the sect leader’s cultivation method,” someone mumbled. “But even then, isn’t it a bit much to gather all the elders for the young master to pick and choose from?”

The Lucun Elder let out a soft sigh and brushed aside his smooth, graceful long hair. “My humble self feels like a cheap napa cabbage right now,” he bemoaned, “laid out in the stall for little Mo-gongzi to pick.”

Flabbergasted silence fell.

Would that fop mind *not* blurting out the whole truth without a hint of finesse?

They waited for quite a while before the sect leader finally came. He walked up the thousand steps to arrive before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, a youth trailing behind him.

Chu Wanning only glanced over briefly and didn’t even bother to get a clear eyeful before looking away to continue examining his finger claw. He spared no second glance.

Sisheng Peak’s procedure for seeking apprenticeship under a teacher was well and truly unconventional. In every other sect, the teacher was high and mighty, and would rest their hand on some new disciple’s head while saying, “Young man, your aptitude is satisfactory; henceforth you shall be my disciple.”

The disciple wouldn’t even get a chance to say, “no.”

Or, the teacher would wave his sleeve with a face of cold derision and declare, “Young man, your forehead is too big, your eyes too dull, and the back of your skull protrudes too far; it is not the proper appearance for my sect. You and I are not fated to be, and I will not accept you as my disciple.”

The disciple wouldn’t even get a chance to prove himself before the teacher would zoom away on his sword, hightailing it out of there faster than a dog.

Things were different here on Sisheng Peak: the teacher and disciple mutually chose one another.

What did that mean?

Sisheng Peak had twenty elders. When a new disciple entered the sect, they would first spend a period of time living alongside everyone and weighing their options before delivering a letter of intent to an elder, expressing their hope to seek apprenticeship.

If the elder accepted, then everything worked out perfectly.

If the elder declined, the disciple could continue badgering them until either the elder gave in or the disciple gave up.

By all appearances, Chu Wanning was exceptionally skilled and handsome to boot, so one would expect his front yard to be filled to the brim at all hours of the day with hopeful disciples relentlessly pursuing him as a teacher. But the reality was far different.

Chu Wanning's appearance was elegant, but his temper was so bad that it made people's hair stand on end. Rumor had it that when he got angry, he would whip female disciples like one would male disciples, and that he would drown male disciples directly in the pond. Not many people were brave enough for this kind of shizun.

Thus, the Yuheng Elder's residence was quiet and lonesome. Other than the darling of the heavens, Xue Meng—and Xue Meng's close friend, Shi Mei—he had never accepted any other disciples. Everyone else preferred to call him a respectful "Elder" over an intimate "Shizun."

Chu Wanning wore a removed expression and insisted that he wasn't bothered by this at all. His head was lowered as he continued to tinker with the ice-cold weapon in his hands, as if he couldn't have cared less. Everything he designed, from the hidden-sleeve weapons to the emergency whistles, was for others. The sooner he finished working on things, the sooner more people would be able to avoid suffering.

So, he didn't expect it at all when Mo Ran chose him without hesitation.

At that moment, his brow was furrowed as he stroked the thorns on the finger claw, pondering over how to improve them. He wasn't paying attention to what the sect leader and everyone else was saying.

Without him realizing it, everything had grown quiet.

Only once he'd thought of a potential improvement did Chu Wanning

notice that his surroundings, which had been buzzing with conversation a moment ago, seemed a little quiet. So, he finally pulled his gaze away from the finger claw and looked up with some impatience and confusion.

That was when he saw a face so brilliantly lit by the sun as to be nearly dazzling.

A handsome youth, head tilted back, was looking up at him. The corners of the youth's lips were curled into a faint, carefree smile, and a marked pair of dimples decorated his cheeks. His demeanor was a lively as the smokey, fiery atmosphere of a marketplace, yet he had a hint of guileless innocence. A pair of purple-tinted black eyes stared unblinkingly at him, filled with fervor and curiosity both.

He was new and, not knowing the rules, stood so close that it was almost impudent.

Someone appearing so suddenly right in front of him startled Chu Wanning, and he reflexively stepped backward as if burned. The back of his head met the trunk of the tree with a *thump*.

The youth's eyes widened slightly. "Ah…"

An awkward silence fell between Chu Wanning and the youth.

"What are you doing?" said Chu Wanning.

The youth grinned. "Xianjun, Xianjun, I've been watching you for ages already. Why won't you pay attention to me?"

Chapter 27:
This Venerable One Will Make You a Bowl of Noodles

CHU WANNING'S HEAD reeled. It was his own fault for being too preoccupied and not keeping his guard up while at Sisheng Peak, to the point that he hadn't even noticed that someone had come so close.

What was happening? Where had this kid come from? Ah, wait, was he that Mo-something…Mo-what again? Mo Shao? Mo Zhu? Mo…Yu?[18]

With practiced ease, he arranged his expression into one of "Strangers: Do Not Approach," and quickly swept the startle and fluster from his phoenix eyes, replacing it with his customary stately standoffishness. "You—"

He was just about to open his mouth and deliver a scolding out of habit when his hand was grabbed.

Chu Wanning was flabbergasted. All his life, no one had ever dared to casually grab him by the wrist in such a way. He was frozen in place for a moment, face dark, with no idea how to react.

Rip his hand away, followed by a backhand slap? But then all he'd need to do would be to yell, "molester!" and he'd be the very image of an offended lady.

So, rip his hand away and no slap? But then wouldn't he seem a little too easygoing?

Chu Wanning was still frozen with indecision when the youth grinned. "What's this on your hand? It's so pretty. Do you teach disciples how to make this stuff? Everyone else has already introduced themselves, and you're the only one who hasn't said anything yet. Which elder are you? Ah, is your head okay? From hitting the tree just now?"

If Chu Wanning's head hadn't hurt before, it did now, after being pummeled by so many questions in a row. His head throbbed like it was about to split open.

In his agitation, a faint golden glow began to gather in his other hand, signaling Tianwen's impending appearance. The other elders were horror-

struck—was Chu Wanning out of his mind? Would he dare to whip even Mo-gongzi?

But Mo Ran grabbed that hand too.

Now the youth had captured both of Chu Wanning's hands. Mo Ran had no idea just how much danger he was in as he stood before Chu Wanning, holding his hands and looking up with a smiling face. "I'm Mo Ran. I don't know anyone here, but based on faces alone, I like you best. How about you be my teacher?"

No one had anticipated this turn of events, and they all grew even more horrified; a few of the elders' faces looked as if they had turned to stone and cracked in half.

"Eh?" said the Xuanji Elder.

"Wow!" said the Pojun Elder.

"Oh?" said the Qisha Elder.

"Uh…" said the Jielü Elder.

"Hah, this is hilarious," said the Tanlang Elder.

The Lucun Elder, in full foppish glory, twirled a strand of hair around a finger and batted his peach-blossom eyes. "Aiya, the little gongzi sure is bold. Truly young and courageous, to dare grope even the Yuheng Elder's ass."

"Could you *please* not say it so nauseatingly?" the Qisha Elder said with disdain.

The Lucun Elder gracefully rolled his eyes, humming. "Hm, I'll say it in a more refined manner, then: truly young and courageous, to dare grope even the Yuheng Elder's derrière."

The Qisha Elder was silent. *Just kill him and be done with it.*

Out of all the elders, the kind and gentle Xuanji Elder was the most popular. His cultivation method was easy to learn, and he was magnanimous and upstanding, so most of Sisheng Peak's disciples studied under him. Chu Wanning had thought that Mo Ran would be no exception. Even if he didn't choose the Xuanji Elder, he would definitely go for the forthright and spirited

Pojun Elder; in any case, whomever Mo Ran chose, it surely wouldn't be himself.

But it was Chu Wanning whom Mo Ran stood in front of. Mo Ran, who was mere inches away, face full of intimacy and fondness—things with which Chu Wanning was wholly unfamiliar. He felt like out of the blue, he'd been designated the role of comic relief, and he found himself flustered for no reason at all, and at a complete loss for what to do.

Chu Wanning only knew how to deal with "respect," "fear," and "loathing." Something like "fondness" was far too difficult.

He rejected Mo Ran immediately and without thinking.

Mo Ran stood in place, stunned, the pair of eyes under those long eyelashes unexpectedly dejected—yet undeterred. He thought about it for a long while with his head down, then mumbled stubbornly in a small voice, "Well, it's gonna be you anyway."

Chu Wanning had no words.

The sect leader watched from the side with amusement and couldn't resist a laugh. "A-Ran, do you even know who he is?"

"How would I know? He hasn't told me."

"Ha ha, if you don't even know who he is, then why are you so set on him?"

Mo Ran, still holding on to Chu Wanning's hands, turned and answered with a smile. "'Cause he looks the gentlest and the most easygoing, of course!"

In the darkness, Chu Wanning's eyes flew open abruptly, vision swimming.

What the *actual* hell?

What exactly had been wrong with Mo Ran's eyes back then, to find him gentle? Chu Wanning wasn't alone in wondering either; the entirety of Sisheng Peak had heard of the incident, and everyone had looked at Mo Ran-gongzi with concerned expressions of "what a foolish child."

Chu Wanning lifted a hand to press against his throbbing temple. His

shoulder hurt, his thoughts were a mess, his stomach was empty, and his head was dizzy. This nap wasn't happening.

He starfished on the bed in a daze for a while before sitting up. He was just about to light a stick of incense to help calm himself down when knocks came from the door again.

It was Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning ignored it, but he didn't say, "get the hell in," or, "get the hell out."

However, this time, the door opened by itself. Chu Wanning lifted his head gloomily, but the already-lit match between his fingers paused in midair without touching the incense and, after a while, went out by itself.

"Get the hell out," said Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran got the hell in.

He had a bowl of steamy noodles in his hands, freshly made. It was simpler this time, plain noodles in pure white broth, sprinkled with chopped onions and white sesame seeds, some pork spare ribs on top, napa cabbage, and a poached egg lightly crisped around the edges.

Chu Wanning was starving, but his face remained impassive. He looked at the noodles, looked at Mo Ran, then turned his face away without saying a word.

Mo Ran set the bowl down on the table and said softly, "I had the inn's cook make these noodles."

Chu Wanning lowered his eyelashes. Of course Mo Ran hadn't made it himself.

"Try to eat some," Mo Ran said. "This bowl isn't spicy, and there's no beef or pea shoots."

Then he left, closing the door on his way out. He felt bad about Chu Wanning's injury, but this was about all he could do.

Inside the room, Chu Wanning sat by the window, lost in thought, his arms crossed as he stared at that bowl of spare rib noodles from far away, until the steam disappeared and the noodles grew cold, with not a hint of warmth remaining.

Only then did he finally walk over and sit down to pick up the cold, congealed noodles with chopsticks and slowly begin to eat.

And so the case of the haunting of the Chen family came to its conclusion. The next day, the group retrieved their black horses from the boarding stable and headed back to the sect along the same road they'd taken to the mission.

All over Butterfly Town, from the tea stands to the food stalls, everyone was talking about what had occurred with the Chen family. In such a middling settlement, a scandal like this would be the talk of the town for at least a year.

"Who would've thought that Chen-gongzi had already married Miss Luo behind closed doors? Ah, poor Miss Luo."

"If you ask me, this wouldn't have happened if the Chens hadn't struck it rich. You really can't let men get rich, or they'll let all their worst impulses off the leash to destroy the whole city."

One man, on hearing that, was rather dissatisfied. "Chen-gongzi did nothing wrong; it was all on his parents. I hope that bastard Landlord Chen's future kids and grandkids are born without assholes."

"The dead are pitiful for sure, but what about the living?" said someone else. "Look at Madam Chen-Yao, treasured daughter of the Yao family—she got the shortest end of the stick, no matter how you look at it. That old, black-hearted Chen bitch swindled the poor girl. What should she even do now?"

"Remarry, of course."

The person rolled his eyes, scoffing. "Remarry? Would *you* take her?"

The peasant who got scoffed at grinned toothily, picking at the gap between his teeth. "If my woman's fine with it, then sure, why not? Miss Yao's real pretty, so I ain't gonna mind the widow thing."

"Puh, keep dreaming; even as secondhand goods she's way out of your league."

Mo Ran's ears perked up from where he sat on his horse, energetically listening here and peering there. If not for Chu Wanning, with his eyes closed

and brows furrowed, “too damn noisy,” all but written on his face, Mo Ran might have even scooted over to join in on the gossip.

Riding side by side, they finally made it out of the town proper and arrived at the outskirts.

Shi Mei let out a surprised noise and pointed off in the distance. “Shizun, look over there.”

A large group of farmers in coarse clothes were gathered in front of the destroyed temple, busily ferrying bricks around. They seemed intent on rebuilding the temple and reconstructing the statue of the ghost mistress of ceremonies.

“Shizun, the previous ghost mistress is gone, but they’re making another,” Shi Mei said, worried. “Will this one cultivate into a deity and cause trouble too?”

“I don’t know,” said Chu Wanning.

“Should we go try to talk them out of it?”

“Butterfly Town’s ghost marriage tradition has been around for generations. It’s not the sort of thing that can be changed by anything we say. Let’s leave.”

Then he set off at a trot, clouds of dust trailing behind him.

It was evening by the time they got back to Sisheng Peak. At the main gate, Chu Wanning instructed his disciples, “Both of you, go report to Loyalty Hall. I will go to the Discipline Court.”

Mo Ran didn’t understand. “What are you going there for?”

But worry was written plainly on Shi Mei’s face.

Chu Wanning’s face was impassive. “To receive punishment.”

The saying went that a crime was a crime, whether committed by a peasant or the emperor, but which emperor had ever actually been thrown in jail to await beheading for killing a man? It was no different in the cultivation realm.

A transgression was a transgression whether committed by a disciple or an elder—these were empty words in the vast majority of the sects. In reality, an elder who committed a transgression might at most write an apology letter.

Which idiot would actually go and obediently receive their round of whipping, or some dozen strikes?

That was why the Jielü Elder's face was green by the time he finished listening to Chu Wanning's confession. "No, it's just that, Yuheng Elder, you really… You really hit the client?"

"Mn," Chu Wanning replied mildly.

"You're really too…"

Chu Wanning looked up to shoot him a glare. The Jielü Elder shut up.

"In accordance with the rules, the punishment for this transgression is two hundred strikes, three days of protracted kneeling in Yanluo Hall, and three months of confinement," Chu Wanning stated. "I do not dispute the transgression, and I am prepared to receive the punishment."

Dumbfounded, the Jielü Elder glanced left and right, then curled his finger. The doors to the Discipline Court closed with a *thud*, leaving only the two of them standing face-to-face in the silence.

"What is the meaning of this?" said Chu Wanning.

"How do I say this… Yuheng Elder, it's not like you don't know—the rules may be rules, but they don't *really* apply to you. The doors are closed; this stays between you and I. What say we just let it slide? If I actually strike you and the sect leader finds out, he'll have my old hide."

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting his breath, so he simply said, "I hold others to the rules, and I will hold myself to the same."

Then he knelt down right there in front of the hall, facing the plaque above the door that read: Discipline.

"Carry out the punishment."

Chapter 28:
This Venerable One's Mind Is a Bit of a Mess

THE NEWS THAT the Yuheng Elder was being punished for breaking the rules spread as if it had sprouted a pair of wings. It didn't even wait until the next morning; practically everyone in the sect found out that very night.

Two hundred strikes would probably kill an ordinary person. Even for a cultivator, it would be quite unbearable.

Xue Meng jumped to his feet when he heard. "What?! Shizun went to the Discipline Court?"

"Young master, please hurry and talk to the sect leader. Shizun is already injured, how can he possibly endure two hundred strikes?"

Xue Meng was so anxious, he was about to lose it. "My dad? That won't do; he's still not back from Taxue Palace. A message by bird won't reach him until tomorrow at the earliest. Why didn't you guys stop Shizun?"

Mo Ran and Shi Mei exchanged a glance. Stop Chu Wanning? Who in the world was capable of that?

"Damn it, I'm gonna go after him right now." Xue Meng dashed off toward the Discipline Court. He hadn't even entered the courtyard when he spotted a group of the Jielü Elder's disciples crowded around the doors to the main hall, whispering amongst themselves. "What're you all doing, standing there? Get out of my way! Move!"

"Young master!"

"Ah, the young master is here."

"Make way for the young master."

The disciples quickly parted to the sides to let Xue Meng through. The doors of Clear Sky Hall stood open. Chu Wanning knelt inside with his back straight and eyes closed, not speaking a word. The Jielü Elder, holding a metal rod, was reading the rules of Sisheng Peak aloud, each rule accompanied by one brutal strike of the metal rod to Chu Wanning's back.

"The ninety-first rule of this sect: Do not injure the innocent, and do

not use cultivator techniques against the common people. Under the rod, do you have any complaints?"

"No complaints."

"The ninety-second rule of this sect: Do not act rashly of one's own accord, and do not indulge in self-gratification. Under the rod, do you have any complaints?"

"No complaints."

The Jielü Elder didn't dare go easy in the punishment. Ninety or so strikes in, and Chu Wanning's white robes were soaked through with blood.

Xue Meng held Chu Wanning in the highest esteem. His eyes went instantly bloodshot at the sight, and he called out at the top of his lungs, "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning pretended not to hear. His eyes remained closed, a slight furrow between his eyebrows.

The Jielü Elder glanced over to the door and said quietly, "Yuheng Elder, the young master is here."

"I'm not deaf. I heard." Blood trickled out from the corner of Chu Wanning's lips, but still he did not look up. "He's just being a noisy child. Pay him no mind."

The Jielü Elder sighed. "Yuheng, is this really necessary?"

"It can't be helped that my disciples are always being disobedient." Chu Wanning spoke lightly. "If I do not receive my due punishment today, how will I have the face to discipline anyone else in the future?"

The Jielü Elder hesitated.

"Please continue."

The Jielü Elder sighed again. He looked at Chu Wanning's pale, delicate neck, exposed above his open collars, curved down gently, like thin mist, and couldn't help but suggest, "Then I'll at least go easier?"

"That would be no different from deception," Chu Wanning said. "Don't worry. It's just two hundred strikes. I can handle it."

"Yuheng Elder…"

“Jielü, there is no need to say any more. Continue.”

The metal rod fell once again.

Even Xue Meng’s voice became distorted. “Jielü Elder! You still won’t fucking stop? Have you no regard for your young master? That’s my shizun you’re hitting! My shizun!”

The Jielü Elder could only force himself to pretend not to hear.

Xue Meng’s lungs were about to explode from anger. “Have you gone deaf, you shitty old man? Your young master is ordering you to stop! If—if you dare hit him again, I, I, I—”

He got stuck on “I” and couldn’t think of what to say. He was only a fifteen-year-old youth, after all. “Darling of the heavens” or not, his strength and status were far below that of the elders. Ultimately, red-faced, he could only choke out an obstinate: “I’ll tell my dad!”

The Jielü Elder did not dignify that with a response.

Chu Wanning let out a nearly imperceptible sigh.

Ninety-seven strikes. Ninety-eight strikes. Ninety-nine strikes. One hundred strikes…

Even the fabric of his clothes was ripped by the strikes. The blood was appallingly red.

Xue Meng couldn’t handle any more. Eyes red with panic, he made to recklessly charge into the hall, but Chu Wanning suddenly opened his eyes and brandished a hand. A barrier instantly split the space in two, blocking off the door and forcing Xue Meng to back away several steps, nearly falling to the ground.

Chu Wanning coughed up blood as he glanced around, his narrowed phoenix eyes as fierce as lightning. “Disgraceful. Go back where you came from!”

“Shizun!”

“Since when has Sisheng Peak’s young master been entitled to order the Jielü Elder to bend the rules?” Chu Wanning said harshly. “Hurry up and get lost!”

Xue Meng stared at him, wide-eyed, a wet shimmer in his gaze.

Mo Ran stood to the side, stroking his chin, the corners of his lips still curled. “Aiya, oh no, the little phoenix is gonna cry.”

At these words, Xue Meng whipped his head around and glared at Mo Ran. His eyes were rimmed in red, but he stubbornly refused to let the tears fall.

He didn’t complain and didn’t talk back. He only crawled up from the ground and dusted himself off with his head lowered and teeth gritted, then knelt facing Clear Sky Hall. “Shizun, this disciple was wrong.”

Chu Wanning was still taking the strikes, back held ramrod straight and never once bending. But his face was pale and a sheen of cold sweat covered his forehead.

“But I’m not leaving,” Xue Meng continued stubbornly. “I’m going to keep Shizun company.”

Having said this, he knelt and refused to get up.

Mo Ran’s eyes were about to roll out of their sockets. Xue Meng, Xue Ziming, darling of the heavens, would only lower himself to this extent in front of Chu Wanning. He was a phoenix to everyone else, but a quail to his shizun. If Mo Ran hadn’t been so certain that Xue Meng had no interest in men, he’d probably wonder if he had a crush on Chu Wanning, to be so hell-bent and without regret. If his shizun were to slap him, the little quail would humbly turn the other cheek.

All right, all right. Brown-noser extraordinaire.

His heart felt contempt, but for some reason, his mouth tasted sour. Mo Ran glared at Xue Meng for a while, growing more agitated the longer he looked. He couldn’t let him be the only one to show devotion.

Chu Wanning already didn’t like Mo Ran; after this trick that Xue Meng was pulling, wouldn’t he be even more biased in the future?

And so Mo Ran knelt as well, next to Xue Meng. “I’ll keep Shizun company too.”

Naturally, Shi Mei followed suit, and all three disciples knelt outside the barrier, waiting.

On hearing the news, the other elders’ disciples all found some excuse or another to come to the Discipline Court to watch the show.

“Heavens, how could it be the Yuheng Elder…?”

“I heard he beat up a common person in a fit of rage.”

“Ah! So scary.”

“Shh, quiet. If the Yuheng Elder hears, you’ll be next on the whipping block!”

“But why is the young master kneeling?” someone else asked.

“Mo-gongzi too…”

Mo Ran was handsome and charming, and he had earned the favor of countless female disciples just going about his daily life. Quite a few of the onlookers felt sorry for him and whispered to each other.

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“Poor Mo-gongzi… What to do? Should we go make a plea on his behalf?”

“We probably shouldn’t meddle in their master-disciple affairs. You can go if you have the guts, but I don’t wanna die yet. Did you already forget that one shijie who got whipped, like, a couple hundred times by the Yuheng Elder?”

Silence reigned.

The two hundred strikes finished. The barrier was finally withdrawn.

Xue Meng scurried up from the ground and stumbled frantically into Clear Sky Hall. When he got close enough to see Chu Wanning’s condition, he let out a furious, “ah!” and spun to grab the Jielü Elder by the collar. “You shitty old man!” he snarled. “Don’t you fucking know to at least hold back?!”

“Xue Ziming.” Chu Wanning’s eyes were closed, his bloodstained lips opening and closing, but his hoarse voice was commanding.

Xue Meng’s joints cracked audibly as he released the Jielü Elder and shoved him aside.

Mo Ran arrived at this moment, still smiling, thinking that the Jielü Elder must definitely have held back in consideration of Chu Wanning’s status. But when he looked down at Chu Wanning’s condition, that smile froze on his face.

Had Chu Wanning seriously not told Jielü Elder about the injury on his shoulder?! The majority of those two hundred strikes had landed unsparingly on that injury. New wounds on top of the old.

Chu Wanning, you… Have you lost your mind?!

Mo Ran’s pupils contracted, a tidal wave of intense loathing washing over him.

He didn’t know what exactly it was that he loathed, or just what he was so angry about, only that a raging inferno was soaring through his stomach and burning through all of his organs. He was used to Chu Wanning being tormented to the breaking point at his own hands, as Mo Ran crushed his dignity and defiled his purity. But Mo Ran couldn’t stand Chu Wanning being bruised and scarred at the hands of anyone else.

Maybe it was because he couldn't forget what had happened in his previous lifetime, but Mo Ran subconsciously felt like this person belonged to *him*. It was for him to let Chu Wanning live or die, to let him be detested or hated—all of that *belonged to him*.

He originally hadn't minded that Chu Wanning was to be punished. He'd thought that as he was an elder, the two hundred strikes definitely wouldn't be made with any real force—or at the very least, that the strikes would avoid the yet-unhealed wounds on his shoulder.

But Chu Wanning hadn't said a thing about it! He hadn't said anything at all! What was this crazy person being so stubborn about? Why was he forcing himself through all this? What the fuck was this stupid idiot trying to prove?!

Head a complete mess, Mo Ran lifted a hand to support Chu Wanning, but Xue Meng had beaten him to it and was already helping Chu Wanning up.

Mo Ran's hand paused in midair, then after a while, lowered back down. He watched them walk away, Xue Meng supporting Chu Wanning, an unknown feeling in his chest.

He wanted to follow, but he couldn't move his feet. Everything that had happened in his previous lifetime was in the past. Now Chu Wanning was only his shizun. None of their muddled, hateful, tender entanglements had occurred.

He shouldn't be entertaining these thoughts. It didn't matter to him who hit Chu Wanning, who supported him, whom he spent time with, or even if someone killed him. None of it had anything to do with Mo Ran.

Shi Mei walked up beside him. "Come on, let's go with them and take a look."

"I'll pass. Xue Meng has it covered. I can't help, anyway, and too many people will just add to the mess." Mo Ran's expression didn't change, but his mind was in disarray. He really, truly could not understand what it was that he felt at this moment.

Was it hate?

Chapter 29:
This Venerable One Doesn't Want You to Die

THAT NIGHT, MO Ran lay in his bed on Sisheng Peak with his hands behind his head. He stared at the roof beams above, completely unable to sleep. Past events played out in his mind, one by one, until finally, in the end, every bit and fragment was just Chu Wanning's face, elegant to the point of frost.

Truth be told, Mo Ran had never understood just how he felt about this person.

The first time he'd seen Chu Wanning had been under the flowering tree in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. He had been wearing a loose robe with wide sleeves—the only one out of the twenty elders who wasn't dressed in the fetching silver-blue armor of Sisheng Peak. That day, as he fiddled absentmindedly with the armored claw on his hand with his head lowered, his profile had looked focused yet gentle, like a white cat bathed in warm, golden sunlight.

Mo Ran had stared from afar, unable to look away.

His first impression of Chu Wanning had been positively glowing. But it hadn't held up against the negligence, the punishments, and the bitter harshness that followed, each on the heels of the one before. That white cat's sharp teeth and claws had left Mo Ran covered in wounds.

Mo Ran had been clinging to life by a bare thread when his uncle saved him from that sea of fire. He'd thought that, once on Sisheng Peak, he would find a shizun who would treat him with compassion, who would sincerely care for him.

But however hard he'd tried to please his shizun, however much work he had put in, it was as if Chu Wanning saw none of it. Conversely, the smallest mistakes earned him a round of ruthless lashings, leaving Mo Ran raw and bleeding every time.

Later, he even learned that Chu Wanning scorned him from the bottom of his heart. That person standing under that flowering tree, his robes white as

snow, had thought of him as “vile by nature, beyond remedy.”

He’d once regarded Chu Wanning as the cold moon in the ninth heaven, had wholeheartedly revered him—adored him. But what was he to that cold moon, really?

A disciple he had no choice but to accept. A despicable lowlife. A worthless child raised in a brothel. A filthy reprobate.

Even though Mo Ran had always assumed a carefree and easygoing demeanor, he’d slowly begun to hate Chu Wanning—a hate mixed with an aggressive unwillingness to yield. He refused to just lie down and take it.

After that, he held on to the resentment he felt as it grew by the day, and he provoked Chu Wanning in the attempt to garner his attention, his praise, his astonishment.

During that time, if Shi Mei had praised him with “well done,” he would’ve flown into the sky with happiness.

But if Chu Wanning had been willing to give him a “not bad,” he would’ve gladly given his life.

However, Chu Wanning had never praised him. No matter how hard Mo Ran tried, how diligent he was, how well he did, his aloof shizun never gave him more than a slight nod before turning his face away.

Mo Ran had been about to lose it. Heaven knew how much he’d wanted to grab Chu Wanning by the face and make him turn around, to force his shizun to look at him, to *see* him, to take back that “vile by nature, beyond remedy”!

But he had been able to do nothing but kneel before Chu Wanning like a docile stray dog, lowering his head and saying with utmost respect, “This disciple will keep Shizun’s teachings in mind.”

In front of Chu Wanning, Mo Weiyu had been lowly to the bone. Even if he was a “young master,” he was still worthless. He finally understood that someone like Chu Wanning would never look at him with anything but contempt.

Still later, after a great deal of things had happened…

Mo Ran took over Sisheng Peak, then aimed for the highest of the highs and became the first-ever emperor of the cultivation world. Beneath his dark banner, everyone trembled with fear and none dared speak his name in more than the quietest of whispers. No one remembered the stain of his unmentionable origins.

Henceforth, there was no more Mo Weiyu, only Taxian-jun.

Taxian-jun. Everyone hated him—hated him in the extreme. Monstrous Mo Weiyu, may he be damned to eternity without rebirth or redemption!

TaxianjunMoWeiyuTaxianjunMoWeiyuTaxianjun—

Ta. Xian. Jun.

But so what if they were scared? Sisheng Peak still reverberated with the rumble of voices shouting in unison as thousands prostrated before him in front of Wushan Palace, all those heads bowing to him in veneration.

"Long live Emperor Taxian-jun."

He felt fantastic. Until he saw Chu Wanning's face in the crowd.

Chu Wanning's cultivation was by that point nullified. He was tied up below the hall, reduced to a mere prisoner at the bottom of the steps.

Mo Ran had decided to execute him. But he didn't want to grant Chu Wanning a quick and easy death, so he'd shackled his limbs, cut a small gash in the artery of his neck, and enchanted the wound to not congeal. His blood trickled out drop by drop as his life drained away bit by bit.

The sun blazed overhead. The coronation ceremony had been underway for a while, and Chu Wanning's blood should have been nearly drained. With this person's death, Mo Ran would finally be freed from his past; thus, he had purposefully arranged to have him bleed out at his coronation. This way, the moment he became the master of the cultivation world would be the moment Chu Wanning became a lifeless corpse. And everything that had happened in the past would be wiped away.

Perfect.

But why, even at death's door, was that man still so indifferent? Still so elegant as to be only cold… Chu Wanning's face was entirely without color, but his expression remained impassive. When he looked at Taxian-jun, it was with neither praise nor fear. Only revulsion, disdain, and—

Mo Ran thought he must have gone mad, or that Chu Wanning must have gone mad—

And a hint of *pity*.

Chu Wanning, who was on the verge of death, who had been defeated by Taxian-jun, *pitied* him! He actually pitied him, he who stood at the apex above all else, who held boundless power. He, he actually—he actually dared!

The rage that had built up in Mo Ran for more than ten years finally drove him mad. Right there in Loyalty Hall—by that point renamed Wushan Palace—in front of the thousands of gathered people, surrounded by the thunder of their acclamation and flattery, he abruptly stood, black robes billowing, and walked down the steps.

In front of all those people, he grabbed Chu Wanning by the jaw, a sweet, yet menacing smile on his twisted face. “Shizun, today is a happy occasion for this disciple. Why aren’t you celebrating?”

The thousands of people fell instantly into a deathly silence.

Chu Wanning was neither deferential nor domineering, his face cold as ice as he said, “I have no disciple like you.”

Mo Ran burst out laughing. The sound of his unrestrained laughter circled the galleries of the golden hall like so many vultures.

“Shizun is so heartless. This venerable one is disappointed.” He continued to laugh as he spoke, his voice resonant. “You have no disciple like me? Then who taught me to cultivate? Who taught me martial skills? And my cold-blooded ruthlessness—who taught me that?! And the whip scars all over my body that still won’t fade—let me ask you, who gave me those?!”

He stopped smiling, his tone suddenly vicious, and a cold light in his eyes.

“Chu Wanning! Are you that ashamed of having a disciple like me? Are my bones too lowly or is it my blood that’s too filthy? Let me ask you, Chu Wanning, let me ask you—what did you mean by ‘vile by nature, beyond remedy’?”

He was going out of his mind, voice twisting as he bellowed.

“You’ve never seen me as your disciple, never thought anything of me!

But I—I once…really did see you as my teacher. I really did respect you. Adored you! Why did you treat me like that? Why did you never spare me so much as a single word of praise? Why was it that no matter what I did, I could never earn even the slightest bit of approval from you?!"

Chu Wanning's entire body shuddered, and his face grew even paler. Those phoenix eyes widened slightly as he stared at Mo Ran. His lips moved, as if he wanted to say something, but at the last, nothing came out.

Everyone who had once been at Sisheng Peak was gone. The last two people left from those bygone days stared at one another, like so.

In the uncomfortable silence that followed, Mo Ran seemed to finally calm down. He closed his eyes, and when they opened, he once again wore that detestable smile that made people shiver. He said, kindly and cordially, "Shizun, haven't you always looked down on me? Haven't you always thought I was lowly?"

He paused, and his gaze swept across the thousands kneeling before his palace like so many crouching dogs. They did so to acknowledge him as the overlord of the cultivation world, above mortal affairs.

Mo Ran smiled faintly. "How about now? Before you die, let me ask you again: In this world, just who is the lowly one, and who is the respectable one? Who's the one stepping on whom? Who won in the end? Who lost?"

Chu Wanning's eyelashes were lowered, as if he was still lost in Mo Ran's confession from a moment ago. Finally, Mo Ran gripped his jaw and forcefully tilted his face up.

But in that instant, Mo Ran froze. It was the first time he'd ever seen regret on Chu Wanning's face. That expression was far too unfamiliar; Mo Ran abruptly pulled back his hand as if he'd been burned. "You…"

Chu Wanning's look was pained. He seemed to be silently suffering some kind of agony that dug into his bones, some sort of anguish that tore apart his organs. His voice was quiet. It floated on the wind, heard by Mo Ran alone. He said, "I'm sorry, Mo Ran. It was this master's fault…"

Suddenly the world fell silent. The sound of the wind, the rustling of the leaves, the rippling of robes, all of it faded away. There was only Chu Wanning's face looking up at him. It was the only thing in the entire world that was clear—all that he could see.

Many things should have passed through his mind at that moment. Glee, smugness, ecstasy. But none of it did. There was but one strange thought in his head, and only that one: When had he become…so much taller than Chu Wanning?

A lot of time really had passed. And many things had changed.

Mo Ran's lips moved haltingly in a whisper. "What…did you just say?"

But Chu Wanning only smiled, a smile that Mo Ran knew yet also did not, and in that pair of phoenix eyes he saw the reflection of his own twisted features.

Then those eyes slowly closed, and Chu Wanning fell backward. In that same instant, Mo Ran gripped his shoulders, his crazed, angry bellow like that of a beast falling to pieces.

"Chu Wanning! Chu Wanning, what did you say? Say it again!"

The person in his arms did not reply, his lips pale as pear blossoms. That handsome face had always looked so aloof, but now, moments before death, it was frozen in a sad smile, a slight curve at the corners of his lips. It was just like the face in Mo Ran's memories, when he'd first seen Chu Wanning in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. A small, gentle smile.

"Chu Wanning!"

That gentleness shattered; haitang flowers withered and scattered across the ground.

Mo Ran finally had what he wanted. He had tread on his shizun's life underfoot as he climbed to the top of the world.

But what was this? What *was* this! The anguish and hatred in his chest only grew worse. What the *fuck* was this?

A faint black fog gathered in Mo Ran's hand as he quickly tapped Chu Wanning's meridians, sealing the last remaining vestiges of his life.

"Were you hoping to die just like that?" Mo Ran's eyes bulged, his expression vicious. "I'm not done with you, Chu Wanning. I still have a score to settle with you—I'm not done! I'm not fucking done yet! If you don't say it to me clearly—I'll crush Xue Meng, Kunlun Taxue Palace, and everyone left who you wanted to protect! I'll rip them all to shreds! You better think

again!”

Forget about the ceremony, and screw the thousands of people still kneeling in front of him. He had changed his mind. He no longer wanted Chu Wanning to die. He hated Chu Wanning, and he wanted him to live—live…

In one sweeping motion, he picked up this person who had lost too much blood, and he evoked his qinggong to jump onto the tall overhanging eaves in a single bound, his robes fluttering like a lone eagle unfurling its wings. He flew rapidly across one roof after another, headed straight for the southern peak—straight for the Red Lotus Pavilion, where Chu Wanning had once lived.

That place had an abundance of spiritual energy and numerous medicinal herbs. Mo Ran was going to bring Chu Wanning back.

A person had to be alive to be hated; if that person died, there would no longer be a reason to hate them. Had he been out of his mind earlier, when he wanted to kill Chu Wanning with his own hands?

If Chu Wanning died, then what would he even have left in this world…?

Mo Ran lay in bed, the taste of past memories lingering on his tongue. It was already late at night, but he couldn’t sleep a wink.

Mo Ran got up, washed his face, got dressed, and with a lantern in hand, headed toward Yanluo Hall.

Chu Wanning had without a doubt just carelessly bandaged his wounds before going there for his kneeling punishment. Mo Ran knew how he was—stubborn to a fault and unyielding to boot, never giving even an iota of consideration as to whether his own body could take it—and Xue Meng couldn’t have stopped him even if he tried.

Sure enough, a small lamp was visible from outside Yanluo Hall. It burned by itself as the candle wax dripped slowly. Chu Wanning knelt with his back facing the door, his posture straight and upright like a pine.

When Mo Ran saw this figure, he felt a twinge of regret. It was the middle of the night—what was he doing, coming to see Chu Wanning? Had he gone mad? But he was already there, and it would have felt silly to just

turn around and leave again.

He thought it over and settled on a compromise. He lightly set the lantern down by his feet. He wouldn't leave, but he wouldn't go in either. Standing outside the window, he propped his elbows on the frame, rested his cheeks in his hands, and stared at Chu Wanning from far away.

The copper bells hanging from the corners of the roof swayed gently, and the sweet fragrance of flowers and plants filled the night air. The two of them—one standing, one kneeling—were separated by a red lattice window and by the empty silence of the hall.

If this had been before his rebirth, Mo Ran would have had the authority to stride into the hall and order Chu Wanning to stop reflecting and go back to rest. If Chu Wanning refused, he would have had the capacity to seal the movement of his limbs and forcibly carry him off.

But right now, he had neither the authority nor the capacity. He wasn't even as tall as Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran's head was all messed up. He watched that person from outside the window, but the person inside never noticed. He couldn't see Chu Wanning's face, and Chu Wanning couldn't see his.

And so the white cat knelt all night, never turning around.

And so the dumb dog stood all night, never once leaving.

Chapter 30:
This Venerable One Doesn't Want to Eat Tofu

"HEY, HEY, did you guys hear? The Yuheng Elder's gonna be kneeling at Yanluo Hall for three days as punishment for breaking the rules."

At morning classes the next day, the disciples gathered at the Platform of Sin and Virtue to meditate. These disciples were all rather young, teens and twenty-somethings. For them, a task like sitting in meditation, heart at peace like still water, was impossible. As soon as the teacher looked away, they chitchatted in hushed tones.

The news of Chu Wanning's punishment had spread like wildfire. The disciples who'd witnessed it the day before shared the gossip without reserve.

"Wow, how do you not know about it? Ohh… Had to go collect night dew flowers in the mountain with the Lucun Elder yesterday, huh? Well, let me tell you what you missed! Last night at Clear Sky Hall, blood splattered the ground—it was utter carnage! The Yuheng Elder took over two hundred strikes! Over two hundred! And every hit was brutal too. It was totally ruthless!"

That disciple punctuated every sentence with an exaggerated expression. He was quite pleased with himself amidst the gasps of the shidi and shimei gathered around him.

"Can you even imagine two hundred-something strikes of the rod? Even a big sturdy man might not survive that, much less the Yuheng Elder. He passed out right then and there! That young master of ours nearly lost his shit. He ran right in there and started brawling with the Jielü Elder. Wouldn't let him touch so much as a hair on the Yuheng Elder. Man, what a scene that was." His face scrunched up like a meat bun in animated excitement, and in conclusion, he held up a wagging finger. "Tsk, tsk, tsk."

A little shimei instantly paled. "Oh no! The Yuheng Elder fainted?"

"The young master seriously fought with the Jielü Elder?"

"No wonder the Yuheng Elder wasn't at morning classes today… That's awful… Which rule did he break, though?"

"I heard he beat up a client in a fit of rage."

Everybody was left speechless.

Now and again, the idle gossip drifted into Xue Meng's ears. The young master of Sisheng Peak had inherited his shizun's terrible temper, but unfortunately for him, it wasn't just one or two people chattering about the Yuheng Elder's punishment, it was everyone on the Platform of Sin and Virtue. The clamor ruffled his feathers, but he could do nothing about it.

The vein on Xue Meng's forehead throbbed incessantly as Mo Ran yawned nonstop, having not slept a wink all night.

Xue Meng had no other outlet, so he grumbled spitefully at Mo Ran. "Morning is the most important time of the day—what are you doing, being a lazy mutt first thing after sunrise?! Is this what Shizun taught you?"

"Hah?" Mo Ran, bleary-eyed, yawned again. "Xue Meng, are you bored or something? Shizun lecturing me is one thing, but who the hell are you? Show your older cousin some respect, you cheeky brat."

"My older cousin is a dog, but hey, if you insist!" Xue Meng said venomously.

Mo Ran laughed. "What a bad child, being rude to your big bro like this. If Shizun knew, he would be so disappointed."

"How do you even have the nerve to bring up Shizun?! Why didn't you stop him from going to the Discipline Court yesterday?"

"Mengmeng, that's Shizun you're talking about. Yuheng of the Night Sky, the Beidou Immortal? I'd like to see *you* stop him."

Xue Meng exploded with rage, eyebrows drawn together in anger as he leapt to his feet and drew his sword. "The fuck did you just call me?!"

Mo Ran grinned, cheek in hand. "Mengmeng, be a good boy and sit back down."

"Mo Weiyu, I'm going to kill you!" Xue Meng roared.

Caught between the two and their bickering routine, Shi Mei let out a long-suffering sigh and rubbed his temples, trying to focus on his book. "Fill the vessel day and night; the spiritual core shall be formed in due time. The heavenly order is absolute; life and death shall remain separated as the stars

of Shen and Shang…”

Three days passed in a flash. Chu Wanning completed his punishment of kneeling in reflection.

In accordance with the rules, next came three months of confinement, during which he could not leave Sisheng Peak. He would also perform odd jobs like helping out with the chores at Mengpo Hall, cleaning the pillars of Naihe Bridge, sweeping the stairs at the gate, and other such tasks.

“Yuheng Elder, to be honest, I think you should just skip this part,” the Jielü Elder fretted. “You are an eminent zongshi, after all. Things like washing the dishes and wiping the floor…are truly beneath you.”

He tactfully opted not to voice the rest of his thoughts: *Most importantly, this old man really doubts whether you even know how to do basic tasks like sweeping floors, cooking meals, and washing clothes!*

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, went to report at Mengpo Hall without even a hint of doubt in his own abilities.

Upon hearing that Chu Wanning was coming to do chores as part of his punishment, everyone at Mengpo Hall—from the attendants to the supervisor—turned pale in fright and alarm, as though a formidable foe approached.

Chu Wanning arrived, white robes billowing. His handsome face was calm and composed, completely devoid of any expression. If you’d added a cloud beneath his feet and a horsetail whisk in his arm, he would have looked no different from the immortals in paintings.

The Mengpo Hall supervisor felt exceedingly awkward and uneasy about having to assign such a beautiful man to things like washing veggies and cooking. But Chu Wanning, totally unaware of his status as a beautiful man, simply stepped into the kitchen. The people working within it couldn’t help but take a step back as his cold gaze swept over them.

Faced with this silence, Chu Wanning got straight to the point. “What should I do?”

The supervisor fiddled sheepishly with the hem of his clothing and thought about it for a while before carefully saying, “Would the elder mind washing the vegetables?”

“Sure,” said Chu Wanning.

The supervisor let out a sigh of relief. At first, he had thought Chu Wanning’s elegant hands were in no way suited for grunt work and that he might be unwilling to do things such as cleaning. However, all the other work that didn’t involve getting dirty required some level of skill, and he feared that Chu Wanning wouldn’t be able to manage the tasks well. As Chu Wanning agreed to wash the vegetables so candidly, he assumed he had no more need to worry.

As it turned out, this supervisor had been far too naïve.

There was a small, clear stream in front of Mengpo Hall. Chu Wanning hauled a basket of deep-green cabbages to it and rolled up his sleeves to start washing them.

Since this area was the domain of the Xuanji Elder, his disciples occasionally passed by. When they saw that Chu Wanning was actually in the stream, washing vegetables, they were all shaken to the point of being unable to do anything but stammer out incomplete sentences. After rubbing their eyes three or four times and confirming that, yes, their eyes were not mistaken, they stuttered out, “Y-Yuheng Elder, m-m-morning.”

Chu Wanning glanced up. “Morning.”

The disciples of the Xuanji Elder shook in place and then frantically fled.

Chu Wanning didn’t bother wasting his time with them. He just focused on his cabbages, rinsing and then tossing them into the basket. He washed with utmost seriousness, carefully peeling the cabbages open leaf by leaf and painstakingly rinsing each one over and over. The result of this method was that, by the time noon came around, the basket of cabbages had yet to be cleaned.

The attendants waited in the kitchen, pacing back and forth in distress. “What should we do? If he doesn’t come back, neither will the cabbages. How are we going to make sautéed beef and greens?”

The supervisor looked at the height of the sun in the sky. “Forget it. Don’t wait any longer. Just change the dish to braised beef.”

And so, by the time Chu Wanning returned, Mengpo Hall’s beef was

stewing in a savory pot and absorbing all those rich flavors. There was clearly no more need for the cabbages. Chu Wanning cradled the cabbages on which he had worked so long in his arms and frowned unhappily.

"Why did you have me wash cabbage if you weren't even going to use it?" he asked icily.

The supervisor broke out into a cold sweat and grabbed some paper to wipe his forehead. In his panic, he said words that he would end up forever regretting: "Because we were hoping the elder would make a pot of tofu and cabbage stew!"

Chu Wanning held his cabbage expressionlessly, saying nothing, but contemplating this in silence.

"If the elder does not wish to, that's absolutely fine—" the supervisor added hurriedly.

"Where is the tofu?" Chu Wanning bluntly interjected before he could finish.

"Yuheng Elder, do…you know how to cook?"

"I'm not completely ignorant of it. I can try."

When noon came, the disciples sauntered into Mengpo Hall as they usually did, cheerful and talkative. They found their seats in groups of three to five and went up to the counter for their meals. The food had always been delicious and rich, and they had no reason to expect today's would be any different.

The braised beef had the perfect fattiness, the yuxiang pork was rich in color and fragrance, the crispy pork were golden and crispy, and the steamed fish with chopped peppers was a luscious and appetizing red. The disciples rushed to line up to grab their favorite foods, hoping the chef would give them an extra sweet and sour rib, or sprinkle some gravy or chili oil on their rice.

The fastest in line were always the disciples of the Lucun Elder. The youngster in front sported a huge zit on his face but still eagerly anticipated his mapo tofu. He gingerly carried his tray to the end of the line and said, without even looking up, "Chef, I want a bowl of tofu."

The chef's pale, elegant fingers doled out a generous serving of tofu.

However, it wasn't the mapo tofu the disciple was used to. Rather, it was a bowl of some black substance—an indiscernible mass that could only be called an abomination.

The disciple stared at it in alarm. "What the hell is this?"

"Tofu and cabbage stew."

Mengpo Hall started to fill with murmuring.

The disciple neglected to take the time to recognize the voice of the person who replied. "Were you trying to make some kind of immortality potion?!" he asked angrily. "In what world is this substance tofu and cabbage stew?! I don't want it—take it back!"

In the middle of his tirade, he looked up to glare at the chef. But as soon as the disciple saw who was standing behind the counter, he shrieked in terror and almost knocked over his entire tray.

"Yu—Yuheng Elder!"

"Mn."

The disciple was nearly in tears. "No, I… That is… I didn't mean that, just now… I…"

"If you won't eat it, give it back," Chu Wanning said, utterly expressionless. "Waste not."

The disciple mechanically picked up the bowl and stiffly handed it to Chu Wanning, then awkwardly shuffled away.

By now everyone knew that Yuheng Elder stood at the end of the counter, so the once-lively Mengpo Hall descended into silence.

Like dogs being pulled along by their scruffs, the disciples stood properly in line and filled their plates in a panic. They walked deferentially to the end of the counter, stammered out broken greetings to the elder, and then ran off as fast as they could.

"Greetings, Yuheng Elder."

"Mn."

"Good day, Yuheng Elder."

"Good day."

“Thank you for your trouble, Yuheng Elder.”

The Yuheng Elder fell silent.

The disciples were to a one respectful and extremely cautious, so Chu Wanning accepted their nervous greetings… But not one of them asked for the tofu and cabbage stew in his pot.

Slowly, the line grew shorter and shorter, and the food in front of all the other chefs was almost gone. Only the pot in front of Chu Wanning was filled to the brim, the food inside gone cold. No one wanted any part of it.

Chu Wanning’s face betrayed nothing, but in his heart, he felt some kind of way. All morning, he’d worked hard to wash those cabbages…

At this moment, his three disciples walked in. Xue Meng, wearing his usual uniform of silver-blue light armor, came over energetically. He happily sidled up to Chu Wanning and said, “Shizun! How are you doing? Do your wounds still hurt?”

“No,” Chu Wanning said calmly.

“Then—then that’s good,” Xue Meng replied.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning glanced at him and said, “Would you like to eat my tofu?”[19]

Xue Meng had no words.

Chapter 31:
This Venerable One's Uncle

IN ORDER TO SHOW his shizun his sincerity, the young master of Sisheng Peak asked for three whole servings of charred tofu and promised to eat every piece without wasting a single one.

Chu Wanning was most pleased, a seldom-seen approval in his eyes.

Upon seeing this, Mo Ran was most displeased. Emperor Taxian-Jun had an inexpressible fixation on Chu Wanning's acknowledgment. He immediately asked for three servings of tofu as well.

Chu Wanning glanced at him. "Can you eat it all?"

Mo Ran absolutely had to one-up Xue Meng. "Three servings is nothing. Even three more on top of that would be no problem."

"All right," Chu Wanning said mildly. He gave Mo Ran six servings of tofu. "You too: waste not."

Mo Ran stared at his six servings of tofu in silence.

Since the other two had done it, Shi Mei naturally followed suit with a smile. "Then, Shizun, I'll have three servings as well."

And so, on the first day of the Yuheng Elder's period of confinement, all three of his disciples got the runs from food poisoning. On the second day, the Jielü Elder sought out Chu Wanning and tactfully conveyed that Mengpo Hall had no need for extra assistance, and to please go sweep the fallen leaves and polish the pillars of Naihe Bridge instead.

Naihe Bridge connected the main areas of Sisheng Peak with the disciples' living quarters. A majestic structure, it was wide enough for five horse carriages to pass over side by side. Nine beasts of white jade representing the nine sons of the dragon stood atop its main pillars, and its three hundred and sixty low pillars were decorated with lion heads.

Chu Wanning quietly swept the ground, then set about diligently wiping down the jade beasts. The task took most of the day. As the sky started to grow dark, it began to rain.

Most of the disciples returning from their classes didn't have umbrellas. They squawked as they scampered toward their quarters, splashing through the puddles on the ground. Drops of rain pitter-pattered on the stone steps. Chu Wanning glanced at the disciples in the distance; the young people were drenched through and through, but the smiles on their faces were bright and carefree.

Chu Wanning knew that those smiles would vanish the moment they saw him. Thus, after thinking it over for a moment, he moved to stand beneath the bridge.

The disciples who ran ahead and arrived at the bridge first couldn't help uttering an, "eh?" as they took in the sight before them.

"A barrier?"

"Why is there a barrier over Naihe Bridge?"

"It was probably set up by the Xuanji Elder," one of the disciples guessed. "The Xuanji Elder is always so nice to us."

The translucent golden barrier covered Naihe Bridge and extended in full resplendence all the way to the main walkway of the disciples' quarters, thereby sheltering them from the rain the rest of the way.

"This is definitely the Xuanji Elder's work. He's in charge of this part of the peak, right?"

"The Xuanji Elder is the best."

"What a pretty barrier. The Xuanji Elder is incredible."

The disciples shook the water out of their dripping hair as they shoved playfully at one another. They laughed as they ducked under the barrier and continued toward their quarters, chattering the whole way.

Chu Wanning stood under the bridge, listening to the commotion above pass by. At length, the disciples were all gone and the bridge became quiet once more. Only then did he slowly take down the barrier and unhurriedly emerge.

"Shizun."

Chu Wanning was surprised to hear someone calling for him. He looked up abruptly, but there was no one on the shore.

“I’m over here.”

When he followed the voice, he saw Mo Ran sitting sideways on the white jade bridge. He wore the customary silver-blue light armor of the sect, and his leg draped lazily over the edge.

The youth had striking features, his eyelashes long and thick like a little pair of fans hanging over his eyes. He held an oil-paper umbrella and as he gazed at Chu Wanning, he almost seemed to be smiling—yet also not.

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One on the bridge, where leaves rustled in the wind; one under the bridge, where rain splashed in the river. For a moment, neither spoke. Both simply looked at the other.

The misty rain blurred the line between heaven and earth, nigh poignant. Now and again, fallen bamboo leaves drifted between the pair, carried by the wind and rain

Finally, Mo Ran laughed. “Xuanji Elder, you’re getting drenched,” he said teasingly.

At nearly the same time, Chu Wanning spoke, voice chilly, “How did you know it was me?”

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, dimples deep and eyes curved in a smile. “A barrier that big is beyond the Xuanji Elder, right? Who else could it be but Shizun?”

Chu Wanning was silent.

Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning couldn’t be bothered to put up a barrier for himself, but an idea popped into his head. He tossed the umbrella over. “I’ll give this to you—catch.”

The bright-red paper umbrella drifted slowly down, and Chu Wanning caught it. The glossy, jade-green bamboo handle still held a trace of warmth, and the droplets of rain that slid along its canopy sparkled as they fell. Chu Wanning looked up at him. “Then what about you?”

Mo Ran grinned deviously. “Won’t I get back perfectly fine if Shizun just uses a little spell?”

Chu Wanning hmphed, but nevertheless, his hand waved lightly in his sleeve. Instantly, a translucent golden barrier spread out above Mo Ran.

Mo Ran looked up and laughed. “Ha ha, how pretty. It’s even got peony patterns. Thanks.”

Chu Wanning shot him a look. “Those are haitang flowers. Only five petals.”

Then he left, white robes under a scarlet umbrella, leaving Mo Ran in the rain to count the flower petals by himself.

“One, two, three, four, five… Ah, it really does only have five

petals…”

By the time he looked back up, Chu Wanning had walked a fair distance away. As Mo Ran stood under the barrier, his eyes narrowed, and the childlike grin on his face slowly faded away. A complicated expression replaced it.

All of a sudden, he didn’t understand what he was thinking. If only his feelings toward people could always be either simple fondness or simple loathing.

The rain didn’t stop for four days. When the clouds finally parted, an entourage of horses and carriages arrived, bells jingling. They splashed through the rain puddles, breaking apart the skies and clouds reflected on the ground as they stopped in front of Sisheng Peak’s main gate.

The bamboo screen lifted, and a folding fan with a red tassel peeked out from inside. It was immediately followed by a pair of silver-trimmed blue battle boots, which stepped out onto the ground with a heavy *thump*, sending dust flying.

Out came a burly man with thick eyebrows, large eyes, and a full, well-kept beard. At about forty years of age, he wore a full set of silver-blue light armor. Although he looked gruff, those large hands waved a dainty, scholarly fan, making for quite the strange sight.

The fan opened with a pop. The writing on the side facing others said: “Xue is Beautiful.” But the writing on the side facing himself said: “Others are Ugly.”

This fan was known throughout the jianghu, both for the martial prowess of its owner and the extreme awkwardness of the writing upon it. One side boasted about the owner while the opposite side mocked the rest of the world. A light wave of the fan, and everyone within a hundred miles would smell the owner’s narcissism. Truly, this was a fan that every single person in the cultivation realm had heard of.

And who was the owner? None other than the master of Sisheng Peak, the one who had been away for more than two months, Xue Meng’s father and Mo Ran’s uncle: Sir Xue, Xue Zhengyong.

The saying went that dragons bore dragons, phoenixes bore phoenixes, and a mouse's son dug holes. It was just as true in reverse: the old man of a peacock son was just as prone to showing off his tail feathers. While Xue Meng's delicate looks were the complete opposite of his brawny old man's, their bones were made of the same stuff. Both felt that "Xue is beautiful; others are ugly."

Xue Zhengyong stretched, shook out his limbs, cracked his neck, and grinned. "Aiyo, finally home. My ass is numb after all that sitting."

Inside Loyalty Hall, Madam Wang was busy blending medicine. Mo Ran and Xue Meng sat on either side of her.

"Four taels of staunching herbs and a shouyang ginseng, please," she said softly.

"Here you go, Mom. Already weighed." Xue Meng handed over the herbs from where he sat cross-legged next to her.

Madam Wang held the staunching herbs up for a sniff. "These are no good. Being stored with patchouli for too long has tainted them—if we use these, the decoction won't be as effective. Please go fetch some fresh ones."

"All righty." Xue Meng got up to go dig through the medicine cabinet in the storage room.

"Three mace of wulingzhi, and one mace of dodder," Madam Wang continued.

Mo Ran deftly handed her the materials. "Aunt, how long will it take to boil the medicine?"

"No need to boil this one; it can just be brewed," Madam Wang replied. "When I'm done grinding the medicine, would A-Ran mind bringing it to the Yuheng Elder?"

At first, Mo Ran didn't want to, but then he shot a glance in Xue Meng's direction. He knew that if he didn't do it, Xue Meng would. For some reason, he simply disliked the idea of Xue Meng spending time alone with Chu Wanning, so he said, "Sure." A pause, then he asked, "Oh yeah, Aunt, is this medicine bitter?"

"Somewhat. Why do you ask?"

Mo Ran grinned. “No reason.” But he grabbed a handful of candy from the fruit bowl and stuffed it into his sleeve.

Everyone inside the hall was hard at work making medicine when a burst of bold, unrestrained laughter came from the door.

Xue Zhengyong strode into the hall, grinning radiantly as he cried out, “Wifey, I’m back! Ha ha ha ha ha!”

Despite his status as the sect leader, he had arrived completely unannounced. Madam Wang was so startled that she nearly spilled all the powdered medicine in her spoon. Her pretty eyes widened. “Husband?”

Mo Ran also stood up in greeting. “Uncle.”

“Ah, Ran-er, you here too?” Xue Zhengyong’s appearance was powerful and imposing, but his manner of speech was kindly. He smacked Mo Ran’s shoulder with vigor. “My boy, I haven’t been gone that long—did you get taller again? How’d it go in Butterfly Town?”

Mo Ran grinned. “It went all right.”

“Good. Good, good, good! I knew nothing could go wrong with Chu Wanning there, ha ha ha ha! Oh yeah, where is he, by the way? Cooped up by himself, fiddling with those playthings again?”

At this, Mo Ran grew a little uneasy. “Uh, Shizun, he…”

His uncle had a fiery temperament and was prone to acting impulsively. His death in their previous lifetime had mostly been the fault of this very personality. For obvious reasons, Mo Ran didn’t want to directly tell him that Chu Wanning had taken two hundred strikes, then on top of that, gotten himself confined for three months. He was just pondering how to break the news when an, “ah” came from behind him.

Xue Meng had returned, holding a pile of staunching herbs in his arms. On seeing his father, he shouted, ecstatic. “Dad!”

“Meng-er!”

Mo Ran secretly let out a sigh of relief. Any time this father and son met, a bout of mutual flattery was bound to ensue. That would give him plenty of time to think of a way to tactfully break the news about Chu Wanning’s punishment.

Sure enough, the peacock father and peacock son spread their tail feathers and busied themselves pelting each other with compliments.

“My son has grown even more handsome in these last two months! You’re looking more and more like your daddy!”

Xue Meng took entirely after his mother and looked nothing like his father, but he took his father’s word for it. “And Dad, you got even buffer!”

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Xue Zhengyong waved a large hand, grinning. “The whole time I was at Kunlun Taxue Palace, I kept thinking about how none of the youngsters there can even hold a candle to my son and nephew! Aiyo, I got so tired of looking at that gaggle of foppish boys. Meng-er, do you remember Mei Hanxue?””

Xue Meng instantly assumed an expression of contempt. “The chubby one who’s been training in seclusion for like a dozen years? I heard he’s the eldest disciple of Taxue Palace. Did he finally come out of seclusion?”

“Ha ha ha, what a good memory. That’s him. The kid stayed with us for a while, way back when. You guys even shared a bed.”

“Fat as a dog and kicked in his sleep—how could I forget him? I got thrown off the bed constantly. You saw him, Dad?”

“I saw him, I saw him.” Xue Zhengyong rubbed his beard contemplatively, lost in thought.

“And?” pushed Xue Meng, the darling of the heavens, who was competitive to a fault.

Xue Zhengyong laughed. “Of course you’re better. Even though he’s a boy, for who knows what reason, his master taught him stuff like dancing and playing instruments. He even sends flower petals flying everywhere when he uses his qinggong! Your dad almost died laughing, ha ha ha ha!”

Xue Meng wrinkled his nose as if grossed out. A little porky with baby fat, playing instruments and dancing while petals fluttered about… “Then how’s his cultivation?”

Mei Hanxue had trained in seclusion for more than ten years, after all. He’d only just emerged a few months ago and hadn’t yet revealed his capabilities to the jianghu. Since he had already won in the category of looks, Xue Meng wanted to see how he fared in terms of cultivation.

This time, Xue Zhengyong didn’t answer straight away. He thought for a while, then said, “I didn’t get to see much of his skills. No matter. Meng-er will surely get to cross swords with him at the Spiritual Mountain Tournament.”

Xue Meng’s eyebrow twitched. “Hmph. Who knows if that stupid fatty will even get to challenge me?”

Madam Wang finished blending the medicine and got up. She patted Xue Meng's head with a smile. "Meng-er must not be so arrogant. Remember to be modest and respectful."

"What's the point in being modest?" asked Xue Meng. "That's for weaklings. I'd rather be forthright like my dad."

Xue Zhengyong chortled. "See? This tiger has no cub for a son."

"This is all your doing. You taught him all your bad habits and none of the good," Madam Wang said, displeased. "What is this nonsense?"

The irritation on her face made Xue Zhengyong realize that she really was a bit irked. He checked his grin and scratched his head. "Wifey, I was wrong. We'll listen to whatever you say. Don't be mad!"

Mo Ran and Xue Meng watched on in long-suffering silence.

Madam Wang had been a disciple of Guyueye in her early years, and rumor had it that Xue Zhengyong had stolen her away. There was no saying whether that rumor was true, but Mo Ran *did* know that his uncle was profoundly in love with his wife, so much so that his iron bones were but soft threads for her to wrap around her fingers. Madam Wang, on the other hand, didn't feel quite the same passion for her husband. Though she was gentle by nature, she often got mad at him over little things.

The years had gone on in this rocky way. Anyone with eyes could see who in this couple felt more deeply for the other.

Xue Meng naturally wasn't going to hang around to watch his own parents flirt with each other. A little grossed out, he clicked his tongue and turned to leave in a huff.

"Meng-er?" Madam Wang hurriedly called, rather embarrassed.

Xue Meng waved his hand and strode briskly away.

Mo Ran also had no intentions of interrupting the couple's reunion and used this excuse to conveniently dodge his uncle's questions. The topic of Chu Wanning's punishment would be better brought up by Madam Wang, after all. He sure didn't want to be the one to deal with it. After collecting the medicine on the table, he made his escape with a smile on his face, even closing the door for them.

Medicine in hand, he strolled leisurely over to the Red Lotus Pavilion.

Chu Wanning's body was weak these days due to his injury, so he'd taken down the barriers that usually surrounded the pavilion. Thus, he had no way of knowing if someone intruded. And so it was under these circumstances that Mo Ran beheld this scene:

Chu Wanning, bathing in the lotus pond.

It would've been one thing if he had been bathing by himself, but in that lotus pond—which was reserved for the sole use of the virtuous and incorruptible Yuheng Elder—were the silhouettes of two other people…

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Chapter 32:
This Venerable One Will Baby You a Bit; Will That Do?

MO RAN STOOD as if he'd been struck by lightning, appalled and unmoving, hidden behind layer upon layer of lotus leaves. Something inside of him had shattered, and it showed in the cracked expression on his face.

Shock, indignation, jealousy, and irritation exploded like fireworks in his head. His lips moved, but no words came out. He didn't even know what had enraged him. Only one thought ran through his mind:

How dare anyone else touch that which this venerable one has slept with?! Chu Wanning, you two-faced, cheating whore! You dare… You dare to…

It in no way occurred to him that the Chu Wanning of this lifetime had never had any intimate relations with him. In that moment, all sense left his mind.

They had spent more than ten years like that, after all—a lifetime, from birth to death. When Mo Ran was lucid, he could set those memories aside and maintain control.

But faced with these circumstances, his mind was in turmoil, and his true self slipped through. He still subconsciously felt that Chu Wanning was *his*. Only now did he realize just how clearly he remembered even the way Chu Wanning's lips tasted when kissed, to say nothing of the passion and desire as they entwined, the ecstasy that ate at his very being…

These were things he hadn't dared think much about, after his rebirth. But now the sight of Chu Wanning's bare back—that familiar figure, those broad shoulders and long legs, those lean, taut muscles, and that slender but strong waist submerged in clear water…

All the memories and emotions he'd tried so hard to suppress rushed back without warning. Even Mo Ran's scalp went numb.

His body, too, reacted to these things. It was an involuntary reaction so fierce that he could do nothing to stop it, and heat pooled in his belly as he watched. By the time he realized what he was doing, he was raising his voice

angrily and shouting, “Chu Wanning!”

Chu Wanning actually had the gall to ignore him.

Because of the mist that lay over the lotus pond, it was hard to see the two people supporting his shoulders. Mo Ran couldn’t make out their appearances. But they stood extremely close to Chu Wanning, the distance between them barely distinguishable.

Mo Ran cursed under his breath and splashed right in, wading through the water toward Chu Wanning. As he grew closer, he realized the truth.

Those—those two “people” were actually automatons made of metal and cedarwood. Even worse, it seemed like they had been using the lotus pond to transfer energy to Chu Wanning, and when Mo Ran had recklessly rushed into the water, he had broken the spiritual array…

This unseen array had held Chu Wanning in an unconscious daze. He leaned against the automatons as light continuously poured through their palms and into the wound on his shoulder. A closer look revealed that he had been in the process of healing himself.

When Mo Ran had rushed through the boundary, the light dispersed. To his horror, the array actually started to *reverse*.

Before Mo Ran’s eyes, the light continued to scatter, and Chu Wanning’s wound began to rapidly eat away at itself. Chu Wanning frowned, let out a noise of discomfort, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then all the scars on his body tore open. In an instant, the blood that poured out of him dyed the pool red.

Mo Ran was dumbfounded. This was Chu Wanning’s Flower Spirit Sacrifice technique! At that moment, he realized that he might have…made a grave error…

Chu Wanning’s spiritual energy was composed of the elements metal and wood. Metal elemental energy, such as the power in Tianwen, was used for offense, while wood elemental energy was used for healing.

The Flower Spirit Sacrifice technique was one such healing art. Chu Wanning could weave the spiritual essence of flora into a healing array to mend wounds. However, if anyone were to enter the array during the process, the floral spirits would immediately scatter, and not only would no healing

take place, it would worsen the injury. In the worst-case scenario, Chu Wanning's spiritual core could even be wholly devoured by the floral spirits.

Fortunately, Mo Ran had a passing familiarity with the Flower Spirit Sacrifice technique from his last lifetime, and he acted swiftly to cut off the flow of energy. Having lost the support of the automatons holding him up, Chu Wanning tipped forward. Mo Ran caught him and held him steady.

His shizun's unconscious face was pale, his lips blue, his body as cold as ice. Mo Ran took no further time to look him over and lifted him out of the pool. Half carrying and half dragging, he brought Chu Wanning back to his room and placed him on his bed.

"Shizun? Shizun!" Mo Ran called to him several times, but Chu Wanning didn't so much as bat an eyelash. But for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, he could've been a corpse.

The sight of Chu Wanning in this state reminded Mo Ran of his previous lifetime. Inexplicably, his throat closed up and his heart began to panic.

In his past life, two people had died in his arms.

Shi Mei. Chu Wanning.

Of the two, one had been the love of his life, the one he'd thought about day or night, and the other had been his mortal enemy, with whom he had been entwined for a lifetime.

With Shi Mei gone, Mo Weiyu disappeared from the world.

And when it happened with Chu Wanning?

Mo Ran didn't know. All he could remember was the sensation of the person in his arms growing colder and colder, and that on that day, he hadn't laughed or cried—that joy and sorrow had both fallen out of his reach.

With Chu Wanning gone, Mo Weiyu had no longer seen meaning in the world.

By candlelight, he looked upon Chu Wanning's bared upper body. Usually, Yuheng of the Night Sky wore clothing that showed as little skin as possible. He favored high collars and wrapped his belt sash three times, the picture of dignity and propriety. Because of this, no one had seen the extent of the injury those two hundred strikes had left on his body.

Even though Mo Ran had seen the wounds on Chu Wanning's back during the punishment at the Discipline Court for himself, all he had really been able to make out was that Chu Wanning's flesh had suffered severe damage. When Chu Wanning was on his feet and walking around as usual in the days following, Mo Ran had thought it couldn't have been that bad after all.

Only now did he realize that Chu Wanning's wounds were far worse than he had imagined. The five wounds left by the ghost mistress had torn open, and in the worst places, he could see all the way through to white bone.

Chu Wanning had probably never asked anyone to help him change his bandages and tried to do everything by himself. The salve had been unevenly applied, and the places he had been unable to reach were infected and festering.

And then there were all the purpling bruises left by the strikes of the rod. They spread across his entire back, leaving no part of his mottled skin unbroken. On top of them, the torn scars from the spiritual backlash just now had washed his back in fresh blood, which flowed ceaselessly, staining the sheets under him red.

If Mo Ran hadn't seen this with his own eyes, he would never have believed that the man who had insisted on wiping down the bridge's pillars, and who had conjured an enormous barrier to shield disciples from the rain, was this same man in front of him—this man whose wounds were so severe and terrible that he belonged in an infirmary under intensive care.

If not for the fact that Chu Wanning was unconscious, Mo Ran would have loved to grab his collar and shake him to demand:

Chu Wanning, what the hell is wrong with you and your stupid pride?

Who would begrudge you if you were to just bow your head and show a little weakness for once in your life? Why are you so fucking stubborn? You're a grown man, and you won't even take care of yourself? Treat yourself a little better?

Why didn't you ask anyone to help you dress your wounds?! Why didn't you just open your mouth and ask for help instead of using those automatons for your healing array?!

Chu Wanning, are you a fucking moron?! How stubborn can you be?!

Mo Ran cursed him out under his breath as he worked quickly to staunch the bleeding. Then he drew some hot water and wiped the blood from Chu Wanning's back. After sterilizing a knife in the flame, he set about cutting away the flesh that had rotted through.

At the first cut, Chu Wanning groaned in pain, his body jerking. Mo Ran held him down. "The hell do you have to groan about?!" he muttered. "Gonna curse me out? If you utter another sound, this venerable one is going to stab this knife right through your chest. You won't feel a goddamn thing once you're dead! Problem solved!"

Only now could Mo Ran let his real, vicious nature show though, yelling at Chu Wanning like he had in the past.

But too many of those wounds had festered, the skin gone white and dead. As Mo Ran sliced away, bit by bit, Chu Wanning's breaths grew heavier and heavier. Even unconscious, this person stifled his voice and refused to cry out in pain. He only broke out into a cold sweat that once more drenched his body, which had just been wiped clean.

An hour later, Mo Ran finally finished applying medicine and bandaging the wounds. He helped Chu Wanning into some robes, then found a thick quilt and laid it over his feverish shizun. Only then did he sigh in relief. When he remembered Madam Wang's medicine, sealed in a paper bag, he got up and brewed a bowl of it, then carried it back to Chu Wanning's bedside.

"Come on, time for your medicine." With one hand, Mo Ran lifted the sleeping Chu Wanning in his arms and propped him against his own shoulder. With his other hand, he brought the bowl of medicine to his own lips, lightly blowing on it before taking a sip to test it. He grimaced, mouth pursing. "What the hell. That's so bitter!"

Still, he let it cool off and fed it to Chu Wanning. However, he only got half a spoonful in before Chu Wanning couldn't handle it and coughed everything up. Most of it got onto Mo Ran's clothes.

Mo Ran held his tongue. He knew that Chu Wanning didn't like bitter things; he could even have been said to *hate* bitter things. But awake, the mulishly stubborn Yuheng Elder would single-mindedly brave the taste and drain the whole bowl in one gulp without complaint. At most, he'd discreetly sneak a piece of candy afterward.

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning was currently unconscious.

There was nothing to be done about it. It wasn't like Mo Ran could lose his temper at an unconscious person. He just had to suck it up and patiently feed Chu Wanning in small mouthfuls. He even used a towel to wipe the corners of his mouth as needed.

Something like this wasn't difficult for Mo Ran. After all, in his past life, there had been a period when he'd fed medicine to Chu Wanning every day, just like this. Back then, Chu Wanning had even tried to resist him, so Mo Ran had slapped him across the face before seizing him by the jaw and pressing their lips together roughly, tongue pushing in to ravish his mouth and taste the coppery scent of his blood…

Not daring to follow that line of thought any further, Mo Ran ended up feeding Chu Wanning the last few spoonfuls rather sloppily, and most of them ended up being coughed up again. Then Mo Ran laid Chu Wanning back down in the bed and tucked him in none too gently.

"I'm doing this out of the goodness of my heart. Don't you dare kick that quilt off in the night. You're already feverish, and you'll catch a cold…"

Halfway through his speech, his temper flared and he kicked the leg of the bed.

"Whatever—why should I care if you catch a cold?! I hope you do. I hope it's terrible and you die!"

He turned around and stalked off.

When he got to the door, something was nagging at the back of his mind. Mo Ran turned back and squinted into the room. After figuring out what was bothering him, he went over and blew out the candle. He left again.

This time, he got all the way to the lotus pond. The sight of the flowers that had bloomed after absorbing Chu Wanning's lifeblood worsened the irritation in his heart.

He was filled with aggravation, but he still marched, stiff and out of rhythm, left arm moving with left leg and vice versa, back into the bedroom. Clanking like a rusty, old automaton, he dragged his feet in a circle around the entire room until he finally, reluctantly, came to stand at Chu Wanning's bedside.

Moonlight shone softly through the half-open bamboo window, illuminating Chu Wanning's peaceful face. His lips were pale, and his eyebrows were slightly drawn together.

Mo Ran considered this for a while, then shut the window for him. Sichuan was a humid region, and it wasn't healthy to leave the window open while sleeping.

After doing this, Mo Ran put his foot down and swore to himself: *If I come back through that door one more time, I might as well be a dog!*

Just as he reached the doorway, he heard a *thump*. Chu Wanning had indeed thrown off his entire quilt.

Mo Ran stared. What was he going to do about this person's habit of throwing off his covers in his sleep?

So that he wouldn't be a dog, the sixteen-year-old Emperor Taxian-jun, with all his integrity and moral backbone, walked out. He would *not* go back on his word. He absolutely *would not* go back through that door again!

So, after a while, the brilliant and powerful emperor vaulted into the room through the window instead.

He picked the quilt up off the ground and laid it over Chu Wanning. Hearing Chu Wanning's pained, labored breathing and seeing his back shuddering where he was curled into the corner of the bed, Mo Ran couldn't muster any of the anger he usually held toward his shizun. He could say, "serves you right," all he wanted, but he felt a twinge of pity for the man.

He sat by Chu Wanning's bedside, keeping watch to make sure he didn't throw the quilt off again.

Late as it was, and after the long day he'd had, the exhaustion finally settled in. Mo Ran's head slowly drooped, and he dozed off.

This sleep wasn't restful in the slightest. Chu Wanning kept tossing and turning, and Mo Ran could hear him groaning under his breath through the murk of slumber.

In his light, hazy doze, Mo Ran couldn't tell the hour, or when he had ended up lying next to Chu Wanning on the bed, holding the trembling man in his arms. Still half-asleep, he cradled him and gently stroked his back, murmuring, "Shh… Shh… Pain, pain, go away…"

In sleep, Mo Ran felt as if he had returned to the Sisheng Peak of his past life, to the empty, somber Wushan Palace. After Chu Wanning's death, he'd never again held anyone in his sleep.

Even if the lingering emotions had been born out of hatred, in the cold loneliness that had followed, day after day after day, he'd still missed him with an almost physical intensity, like a thousand ants were gnawing on his heart. But no matter how much he missed him or how hard he wished, Chu Wanning wouldn't come back.

Mo Ran had lost the last flame of his life.

Mo Ran held Chu Wanning that entire night. Between the dreams and the veil of sleep, at times he knew clearly that he had been reborn, yet at others, he felt as if he was still in his past life.

Suddenly, he was almost afraid to open his eyes. He was afraid that when he woke in the morning, it would be to a cold, empty pillow and drafty curtains. And he would once again be utterly alone for the rest of his life.

He was certain that he hated Chu Wanning. But, as he held him in his arms, Mo Ran felt wetness gather at the corners of his eyes. This was a warmth that the thirty-two-year-old Taxian-jun had thought he would never again possess.

"Wanning, you'll be okay……" It was in this foggy state, as he stroked the hair of the man in his arms as if he were the Mo Ran of the past, that this tender phrase escaped his mouth.

He was so tired that he didn't realize what he had said, or what he'd called the other man. The words slipped out naturally, and he didn't think much on them. Mo Ran let out a long breath and fell into a deeper slumber.

The next morning, Chu Wanning's eyelashes fluttered as he slowly came to. Because of his strong cultivation, his high fever from the night before had receded.

Chu Wanning idly opened his eyes, mind muddled with sleep. But when he tried to get up, he found someone else was lying in bed with him.

M-Mo Weiyu?!

He was startled, to say the least. Chu Wanning paled, but he couldn't

for the life of him remember what had happened the night before. Even worse, his movements woke Mo Ran.

The young man yawned, youthful face lightly flushed from sleep. He squinted into the morning light, glanced over at Chu Wanning, and said vaguely, “Ah…let this venerable one sleep for a while longer… Since you’re awake, why don’t you go make me egg and meat congee…”

Chu Wanning was speechless.

What kind of nonsense was this? Was he talking in his sleep?

Mo Ran’s mind was fuzzy. When he saw that Chu Wanning wasn’t getting up to make him breakfast, he didn’t press the matter. Instead, he smiled lazily and reached out, pulling Chu Wanning’s face closer, and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips.

“If you don’t want to get up, that’s fine too. This venerable one just had the most terrible dream. In it… Ah…never mind.” He sighed, embracing the other man, who had by this point gone completely stock-still. Mo Ran rested his chin against the head of the man in his arms and murmured, “Chu Wanning, let me hold you a little while longer.”

Chapter 33:
This Venerable One Is Off to Fetch His Weapon

CHU WANNING was so shocked by the sudden kiss that he couldn't even process what Mo Ran was saying. It all sounded like a distant murmur to him, as if a heavy rain had started to pour down on his head.

Mo Ran, on the other hand, obliviously muttered a few more words and fell back asleep.

Chu Wanning wanted to shake him awake.

However, there was a haitang tree swaying in full bloom outside the window. Just as Chu Wanning lifted his hand, a light pink flower petal landed delicately on the tip of Mo Ran's nose.

Mo Ran rubbed his nose a little in discomfort but was sleeping so sweetly that he didn't wake up. For no reason discernible to Chu Wanning himself, the arm he had stretched to shove Mo Ran away changed course and instead picked the flower petal between his fingers to examine it.

As he lost himself in thought, staring at the petal, some things slowly came back to him. He remembered that, the day before, Mo Ran had dressed his wounds and fed him medicine. Afterward, Mo Ran had cradled him in his arms, gently stroking his hair and back long into the night and whispering softly into his ear.

Chu Wanning was baffled. That *had* to have been a dream, right?

The tips of his ears went red, the bright color not unlike that of the haitang petal between his fingers. His reprimand died in his throat. He really…didn't even know where to begin.

"How did you end up in my bed?"

That sounded like a young maiden who had made a mistake.

"Get the hell out—who let you sleep here?!"

That sounded like a she-devil who had made a miscalculation.

"How dare you kiss me?!"

If one really thought about it, it had been nothing more than two lips touching. Compared to that incident in the illusory world, it could barely even be called a kiss. Making a fuss would only make it look like he really did have something to hide.

The Yuheng Elder, at a complete loss, could only roll over and bury his face in the quilt. His slender fingers clutched the corner of the cover in agitation and humiliated rage.

In the end, he decided to pry Mo Ran off of him, sit up, and get immaculately dressed, and only *then* did he shake the other man awake.

And so, when Mo Ran blearily opened his eyes, the sight that greeted him was that of the Yuheng Elder sitting on the edge of the bed with an unreadable, chilly look on his face.

Mo Ran broke into a cold sweat. “Shizun, I—”

“You broke past the boundary of my Flower Spirit Sacrifice technique yesterday?” Chu Wanning responded expressionlessly.

“I didn’t mean to…”

“Forget it,” Chu Wanning said curtly and waved his hand like it was nothing. “You should get up. Get to morning classes.”

Mo Ran was about to lose it. He ran his hands through his hair fretfully. “How did I fall asleep here?”

“Exhaustion,” Chu Wanning replied, perfectly calm. “From the look of you, it doesn’t seem like you got much rest yesterday.” He glanced at the medicine on the table. “In the future, don’t barge into the Red Lotus Pavilion on your own. If you need something, notify me in advance.”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“You may leave.”

Taxian-jun, feeling like he’d narrowly escaped death, hurried to run as far away as possible.

After he left, Chu Wanning lay back down on his bed and lifted his arm, hand outstretched. From the space between his fingers, he watched as the radiant blossoms outside his window drifted and fell like snow in the wind. The soft colors of the haitang petals were just like his hazy memories

of the night before. Delicate, yet hard to distinguish as either truth or wishful thinking.

He decided that he'd rather die before ever bringing up what had happened. It was *far* too embarrassing.

The Yuheng Elder cared about his pride above all else and would rather save his face than his own life. And so, when Mo Ran next saw Chu Wanning a few days later, the Yuheng Elder was once again his usual self, elegant and composed, white robes billowing gracefully.

Neither of them brought up that night. But sometimes, when their eyes met, Mo Ran's gaze seemed to linger on Chu Wanning a bit longer before they habitually chased after Shi Mei.

And what of Chu Wanning? As soon as his gaze met Mo Ran's, he would immediately turn coldly away. But when he thought Mo Ran wasn't looking, he would, as if entirely by accident, steal a second glance.

Xue Zhengyong soon found out about Chu Wanning's punishment. As expected, the master of Sisheng Peak was protective to a fault, and he instantly threw a fit. However, he couldn't rightfully direct it at anyone in particular and could only close his door and sulk by himself.

If he had known this would happen when they first devised the rules, he would've added one more: The rules do not apply to the elders.

Madam Wang steeped a pot of tea and soothed Xue Zhengyong with gentle words for a long while before he finally calmed down.

"The Yuheng Elder is really too stubborn," he said. "If he tries to do this again in the future, please help me talk him out of it. He's such an eminent zongshi that the upper cultivation sects couldn't get him to join them no matter how they begged, yet here he is with us, suffering like so. How can I live with myself?"

"It's not that I didn't try," said Madam Wang. "You know how he is—stubborn to a fault."

"Ah, forget it, forget it. Wifey, give me some of those painkillers and regenerative medicines you made. I'm gonna go check on Yuheng."

"The white one is to be taken orally, the red one is for external

application.” Madam Wang gave him two small porcelain bottles. “Ran-er mentioned that the Yuheng Elder’s been wiping down the lions at Naihe Bridge lately. You should be able to find him there.”

Xue Zhengyong tucked the bottles into his pocket and rushed over to the jade bridge. Chu Wanning was indeed there. It was shortly past noon; the disciples were busy practicing their cultivation, and few people passed by Naihe Bridge. Chu Wanning stood alone on the gentle curve of the arc, his figure tall and straight. Leaves rustled softly on the nearby shores. As he stood there in his white robes amongst the graceful bamboo, he was the picture of refinement.

Xue Zhengyong walked over, grinning. “Watching the fish, Yuheng Elder?”

Chu Wanning’s glanced over. “Sect Leader must be joking. This river connects to the yellow springs of the underworld; there are no fish.”

“Ha ha, just pulling your leg. You’re all elegance, no humor. I really worry over how you’re gonna find a wife!”

Chu Wanning did not dignify that with a response.

“Here, some medicine. My wife made it. Take the white one orally, apply the red one externally. They’re super effective, and they’re for you.”

At first, Chu Wanning didn’t want the medicine, but seeing how proudly Xue Zhengyong offered them—as if his wife’s medicine was a most precious treasure—he couldn’t refuse. So, he accepted them with a mild, “Thanks.”

Xue Zhengyong was an unrefined man, but in front of Chu Wanning, he was rather more reserved, and he refrained from simply blurting things out. He thought for a moment before settling on a topic. “Say, Yuheng, the Spiritual Mountain Competition is coming up in three years. The young and talented from every sect will gather to vie for the top spot. What do you think of Meng-er and Ran-er’s odds?”

“Three years is a long time,” Chu Wanning replied. “It’s hard to say. But right now, Mo Ran lacks the drive to improve, while Xue Meng is overly conceited and prone to underestimating his opponents. Neither has the right attitude.”

His words were blunt and cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Aiya, they're just young…" Xue Zhengyong mumbled, a little embarrassed.

"They've already come of age and no longer count as such."

"You're not wrong. But still, they're not even twenty yet; I can't help being a little biased as their father and uncle, ha ha."

"An undisciplined child is the fault of a neglectful father and an irresponsible teacher," said Chu Wanning. "If the two of them end up walking the wrong path in the future, that blame will fall squarely on you and me. Can you really afford to be biased?"

Xue Zhengyong couldn't respond.

Chu Wanning continued, "Does the sect leader remember the two 'darlings of the heavens' from Linyi Rufeng Sect from some years back?"

Xue Zhengyong's heart dropped at the mere mention.

Twenty or so years ago, there had been a pair of brothers from Rufeng Sect, the foremost sect of the upper cultivation realm. From a young age, both had been immensely gifted and tremendously skilled. By the age of ten, they could each individually take down hundred-year-old demons, and by fifteen, they were capable of devising new spells, and either could have started his own sect if he so desired.

But the cultivation world wasn't big enough for the both of them. The brothers were each far too exceptional and had eventually ended up having a falling out. At that year's Spiritual Mountain Competition, the younger brother even stole the older brother's secretly developed technique. For this, he was censured by all the sects and scorned by every elder. As soon as the competition ended, the younger brother was promptly punished by their father. His pride was unable to bear it, and he henceforth bore a deep grudge that led him to turn to unscrupulous cultivation methods. Ultimately, he became a crazed monster.

By bringing this up now, Chu Wanning was undoubtedly trying to remind Xue Zhengyong that Xue Meng and Mo Ran might be exceptional, but that heart was far more important than skill.

Unfortunately, though Xue Zhengyong was hard on himself and

serious with his disciples, he was hopelessly addled when it came to his son and his nephew, to the point that he spoiled them. So, he didn't really take Chu Wanning's words to heart, and he only laughed. "They won't end up like those brothers with the Yuheng Elder guiding their way."

Chu Wanning shook his head. "Human nature is set. It isn't so easily changed, not without tremendous resolve."

Xue Zhengyong couldn't help feeling a little uneasy at Chu Wanning's words, unsure if they had a hidden meaning. He hesitated for a while, but he ended up asking after all. "Yuheng, do you… Ay, don't get mad, but do you perhaps look down on that dumb nephew of mine?"

Chu Wanning hadn't meant that at all. The unexpected misunderstanding caught him so off guard that he choked on his own words.

"Actually, I don't really care whether or not they come out on top of some competition three years in the future," Xue Zhengyong continued worriedly. "Ran-er especially, he didn't exactly have an easy life growing up; it can't be helped if he's a little difficult or disobedient. I hope you don't dislike him for having been raised in an entertainment house. Ay, he's all I have left of my da-ge. I can't stop feeling guilty for not having been there for him all those years…"

"Sect Leader is mistaken," Chu Wanning interrupted. "I don't look down on him at all. If I minded his background, I wouldn't have accepted him as a disciple."

This direct and certain response relieved Xue Zhengyong. "That's good, then. That's good."

Chu Wanning's gaze fell back to the river currents coursing beneath the bridge as they surged and crashed, and he said no more.

Unfortunately, this conversation, and Chu Wanning's confession, were swallowed up by the swelling waters just like they had been in their previous lifetime. No other person ever heard him say that he neither disliked nor looked down on Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning's three months of confinement passed. One day, he called his three disciples to the Red Lotus Pavilion to say, "Since your

spiritual cores have stabilized, I've called you here to take you to Dawning Peak, where you may attempt to summon your own weapons."

Xue Meng and Shi Mei's eyes widened, their faces ecstatic.

Dawning Peak was a sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm that stood thousands of feet tall, its cliffs steep and fathomless. According to legend, Dawning Peak was where Gouchen the Exalted had once forged weapons.

Gouchen the Exalted, the god of weaponry, oversaw the northernmost and southernmost ends of the heavens, and all the weapons in the world were part of his domain. During the Heavenly Emperor's war to rid the realm of demons, Gouchen the Exalted had devised the first true "sword" of the world using the mountains as the base material, the seas to quench the blade, and his own celestial blood as the forging flames. This sword had pierced the heavens and the earth alike, and with one strike, it had split the land into pieces and caused the seas to reverse their flow.

"Sword" in hand and using only two strikes, the Heavenly Emperor had forced the demon race beneath the earth, leaving them henceforth unable to rise up.

Those two strikes had cut horizontally across the mortal realm, rending a pair of deep gashes into the earth. After the war, the skies had wept and ghosts had howled through the night. Flooding and desolation plagued the realm as torrential rain poured down for a thousand years, until it filled the pair of gashes. There the waters had become the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers, which now nurtured countless lives.

Dawning Peak, the birthplace of that holy sword, had thence become a sacred place, and many cultivators made pilgrimages there. Even now, the spiritual energy left behind by the ancient gods remained potent in its vicinity, and countless mysterious creatures roamed those peaks, where all manner of peculiar flora thrived. Dawning Peak was also the location where many cultivators achieved enlightenment and ascended to the heavens.

But to most people, the biggest appeal of this incredible mountain where the holy sword had been forged was Jincheng Lake. This icy lake sat at the summit of the peak and was frozen all year-round, glimmering as it reflected the light of the rising sun.

Legend had it that when Gouchen the Exalted had cut open his palm and used his own blood to forge the holy sword, a drop had fallen into the dent at the summit. That drop of blood, yet to be exhausted even after a thousand years, had become Jincheng Lake, its waters so clear that one could see to its very bottom.

Regardless of whether the legend was true, Jincheng Lake's wonders were real. Although it was covered by three feet of ice all year round, some few cultivators were able to use the power of their spiritual cores to temporarily thaw the surface. At this point, an ancient mythical beast would leap ashore holding a weapon in its mouth, and offer the weapon to that person.

"Shizun, what kind of mythical beast emerged when you went to get your holy weapon?" Xue Meng asked excitedly.

"A kunpeng," answered Chu Wanning.

Xue Meng's eyes sparkled. "Awesome! I can't wait to see a kunpeng!"

"Don't count your kunpengs before you thaw that lake," Mo Ran jeered.

"What's that supposed to mean? You think I can't thaw Jincheng Lake or something?"

Mo Ran laughed. "Aiya, don't get your feathers so ruffled. I said no such thing."

"It won't necessarily be a kunpeng," said Chu Wanning. "It is said that hundreds of mythical beasts live within the lake, guarding the holy weapons. Whichever one takes a fancy to you will be the one to offer you a weapon that it's acquired. Additionally, each mythical beast has its own unique temperament. It will make a request of you, and if you cannot complete its request, it will take the weapon back and return to the waters."

"So that's how it is?" Xue Meng asked, curious. "Then, Shizun, what did the kunpeng ask of you?"

"It said it wanted to eat a meat bun," Chu Wanning replied.

The three disciples were silent for a moment, and then broke out into laughter.

"You scared me—I almost thought it would be something

challenging," Xue Meng laughed.

Chu Wanning also smiled a little. "I just got lucky. The mythical beasts make bizarre requests; they could ask for anything. I once heard of someone who summoned a xishu. That little rat asked him to give it his wife's hand in marriage. He refused, so the rat took back the weapon and left. In the end, that man never again got an opportunity to acquire a holy weapon."

"That's such a pity…" Shi Mei murmured.

Chu Wanning glanced at him. "What's there to pity? Honestly, I respect him for his noble character."

Shi Mei hurriedly corrected himself. "Shizun misunderstands; I didn't mean it that way. Of course one's wife can't be replaced with even the most powerful of weapons. I just think it's a pity that he missed out on such a godly weapon."

"It's just a rumor, anyway," Chu Wanning said. "Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to meet a man like that for myself. Rather, what I saw many years ago at Jincheng Lake was a repulsive display that dirtied my eyes."

He paused as if reminiscing, his expression darkening as his brow furrowed.

"Never mind, forget it. Who knows how many instances of unwavering loyalty this lake has borne witness to over these past thousand years, and how many instances of chilling heartlessness? How many people are genuinely capable of resisting the allure of a holy weapon—of abandoning their chance to grow stronger—just to stay true to their heart…? Heh."

Chu Wanning let out a grim chuckle, as if perturbed by something in his memories, before rearranging his features into their customary impassiveness. But his brow remained fractionally knitted as if in disgust, and he pressed his lips tightly together, speaking no more on the matter.

As Chu Wanning looked unhappy, Xue Meng tried to change the topic. "Shizun, it's said that all of Jincheng Lake's holy weapons have a temper of their own. Was it easy for you to get the hang of yours when you first got it?"

Chu Wanning raised his eyebrows. "This teacher has three holy weapons," he said tonelessly. "Which one are you asking about?"

Chapter 34:
This Venerable One Falls Out of Favor

ONLY CHU WANNING could say something so earth-shatteringly astonishing in such a calm and matter-of-fact manner.

Upon hearing this, his three disciples each had their own thoughts on the matter.

Xue Meng's thoughts were the simplest—a single exclamation: *Ah!*

Mo Ran's thoughts were a little more complicated. He recalled certain things from his previous lifetime as he stroked his chin and decided that he definitely wanted to go through this lifetime without ever seeing Chu Wanning's third weapon.

As for Shi Mei, he tilted his head, a faint light flickering in that pair of hazy, peach-blossom eyes, as if in reverence or fascination.

"Did you get Tianwen from Jincheng Lake?"

"Mn," Chu Wanning answered.

"Then the other two…"

"One was also from there, but not the other," he replied. "In any case, weapons tend not to have particularly fierce temperaments, so they should be manageable. There's no need to worry."

Xue Meng sighed with admiration. "I wish I could see Shizun's other holy weapons."

"Tianwen is more than enough for most situations," said Chu Wanning. "As for the other two, it will be for the best if I never have to use them."

Xue Meng reluctantly made a noise of agreement, but a light danced in his eyes. Chu Wanning noticed this; he knew that Xue Meng was combative by nature, and that such things were not so easily suppressed. Luckily, Xue Meng's heart was in the right place, so with some guidance, there would be little cause for concern.

Mo Ran stood to the side, still stroking his chin, his smile not quite

reaching his eyes. The purpose of a weapon was to take the life of another; a righteous man would only resort to such things if there was indeed no other option. Chu Wanning…be it in this life or the last, that righteousness of his was truly his downfall.

All that bullshit about "justice always triumphing over evil" was just the way it went in books, but this idiot insisted on taking that kind of stuff seriously. For all his exceptional talent and martial prowess, it had served him right to end up as a mere prisoner beneath the steps, his bones in the dirt.

"Shizun." Shi Mei's voice cut off Mo Ran's musing. "This disciple heard that hundreds—if not thousands—of people climb Dawning Peak every year in search of a weapon, but only one or two are able to thaw Jincheng Lake. On top of that, in the last few years, no one has managed to do it at all. This disciple's cultivation is weak… I really…don't have a chance. A-Ran and the young master are both outstanding, but maybe I should just stay behind and practice my basics."

Chu Wanning did not answer immediately, his face like fine porcelain layered with a faint mist, as if he was in deep in thought.

In Mo Ran's last lifetime, Shi Mei had also turned down the chance to go to Dawning Peak due to his low self-confidence.

Mo Ran immediately put on a grin. "There's no harm in trying. Even if it doesn't work out, just think of it as taking a field trip. It's better than staying cooped up on Sisheng Peak all day. Why not go out and see the world instead?"

Shi Mei only became more nervous. "No, but, I really am too weak. And there are so many people at Dawning Peak—if disciples from another sect challenge me to a fight, I'll definitely lose and embarrass Shizun…"

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes. "Is that what you're afraid of?"

The words were strange, as if they were a question, yet also as if they were merely rhetorical.

The other disciples didn't sense anything off, but Shi Mei felt a creeping chill in his heart, and when he looked up, his eyes met Chu Wanning's cold, biting gaze. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning remained expressionless as he spoke. "You specialize in

healing. Fights aren't your forte to begin with. If someone bothers you with such things, simply refuse. There is no shame in that."

Mo Ran grinned. "Don't worry, Shi Mei, you have me."

And so the three disciples packed for the trip and set off.

Their destination this time was quite far away, all the way in the upper cultivation realm. Riding horses would have been too exhausting, and as before, Chu Wanning didn't want to go by sword, so they went by carriage. They traveled at a relaxed pace for more than ten days before they finally arrived at a city by the foot of Dawning Peak.

The three disciples had already climbed out of the carriage, but Chu Wanning didn't feel like moving just yet. He nudged the carriage's bamboo screen aside. "We'll stay the night here. A little more traveling tomorrow and we'll be at Dawning Peak."

Their rest stop was called Dai City. Though not large, it was affluent and bustling. The women wore silk and jade, and the men were dressed in expensive brocade. It was easily more opulent than even the richest settlements in the lower cultivation realm.

Xue Meng clicked his tongue. "Look at these upper cultivation realm mongrels. The scent of meat and wine wafts out of the doors of the rich while the poor starve and freeze to death in the streets."

Mo Ran disliked it as well, and so for once he didn't quibble with Xue Meng. Instead, he made fun of the scene before him with a sweet smile on his face. "No kidding. I'm so jealous. No wonder so many people are desperate to move to the upper cultivation realm. Even being a commoner who isn't a cultivator here is a much better life than what you get down in the lower cultivation realm."

Chu Wanning took out and donned a silver mask before leisurely disembarking from the carriage. He looked around at the hustle and bustle, but it was hard to guess what he was thinking.

"Why is Shizun wearing a mask?" Xue Meng asked, puzzled.

"This is Linyi Rufeng Sect's territory," Chu Wanning replied. "It's best if I don't show my face here."

At the sight of the lingering confusion on Xue Meng's face, Mo Ran

sighed. “The li’l phoenix must have left his head back home, if he’s forgotten that Shizun used to be Linyi Rufeng Sect’s guest master.”

His words jolted Xue Meng’s memory, but the darling of the heavens wasn’t about to admit that he really had forgotten. Face red, he rolled his eyes. “O-of course I knew that! But Shizun was only their guest master; it’s not like they owned him or anything. There was no reason he couldn’t just up and leave. Even if Rufeng people do see him, what’re they gonna do, drag him back?”

“You blockhead, have you seriously never heard?” Mo Ran asked. “After Shizun left Rufeng Sect, basically no one from the upper cultivation realm ever figured out where he went. Whenever we’re out on exorcism missions and we get asked who we’re apprenticed under, haven’t we always just said ‘Sisheng Peak’ without specifying a teacher?”

Xue Meng was taken aback for a moment before comprehension dawned on him. “Oh, so Shizun’s whereabouts are a secret? But Shizun is so strong—why would he need to hide?”

“It’s not that I’m deliberately hiding, I just don’t want to be bothered,” Chu Wanning said. “Let’s go find an inn.”

An inn attendant jogged over, greasy face gleaming. “Welcome. Will the four xianjun be staying with us?”

“Four rooms,” said Xue Meng.

The attendant forced a smile while wringing his hands. “So sorry, Xianjun. All the inns in the city have been pretty full recently, so I’m afraid we don’t have four rooms to spare. Would it be too much trouble to ask the xianjun to share? How does two rooms sound?”

There was nothing to be done about it; they would just have to share. But when it came to assigning those rooms, a small problem arose.

“I wanna room with Shi Mei.” Mo Ran took the opportunity to make this declaration while the three disciples were standing by the side as Chu Wanning paid the bill.

Xue Meng wasn’t having it. “Like hell you are.”

Mo Ran feigned shock. “Eh? I thought you liked sticking close to

Shizun."

"Th-that doesn't mean I want to—" Xue Meng had the utmost respect for Chu Wanning, but he was also afraid of him. Truth be told, even he couldn't say if what he felt toward the man was more adoration or fear.

Xue Meng's reddened face made Mo Ran grinned smugly. "Didi, why do I get the feeling that it's not that you don't want to sleep with Shizun, but that you're too scared to?"

Xue Meng's eyes went round as orbs. "It's not like Shizun's going to eat me! Why would I be scared?!"

"Oh." Mo Ran's shit-eating grin only widened. "But Shizun hits people in his sleep, did you know that?"

Xue Meng stammered, face going from pale to blue and back again, before he realized something. "How do you know what Shizun's like in his sleep?!" he shot back in a rage. "Have you slept with him before?"

That sounded a bit ambiguous, even though Xue Meng definitely hadn't meant it that way. Mo Ran sneered to himself. Not only had this venerable one slept with him before, this venerable one had *slept with him* before.

But real men didn't flaunt past conquests, so he only continued smiling. "If you don't believe me, go ahead and see for yourself tonight. Oh yeah, don't forget to bring a bottle of salve—you're gonna need it."

Xue Meng was just about to fly into a rage when Chu Wanning finished paying and came over. He glanced mildly at them and said, "Let's go."

The three youths followed their shizun upstairs like three little tails. Despite their bickering moments ago, as they stood in front of the rooms, all three of them looked down meekly and waited for Chu Wanning to speak.

Truth be told, their bickering hadn't carried any weight at all. When it came to actually assigning the rooms, they all shut up and waited for Chu Wanning to decide.

Chu Wanning paused before saying, "There are only two rooms. Which of you…"

He paused, feeling a little self-conscious. How was he supposed to say,

Which of you wants to be with me? It sounded a bit hesitant and pitiful even to him—simply unbefitting of the Yuheng Elder.

How was he supposed he say it, then? *Mo Weiyu, you're coming with me.* Like that?

Forget it. Add a spiked club and a tiger pelt, and he'd be no different from some shady bandit stealing a family's young daughter. He was a respected zongshi, and he had to protect his face. Besides, ever since that one night at the Red Lotus Pavilion, both of them had felt awkward and avoided being alone together.

Chu Wanning's face remained impassive, but a thousand thoughts barreled through his mind. A good while passed before he lifted his chin, calm and collected, and nodded slightly toward Xue Meng. "Xue Meng will room with me."

Xue Meng was caught completely off guard.

Mo Ran had been smiling, but the smile dropped right off his face. He had indeed hoped that Xue Meng would room with Chu Wanning—so that Mo Ran could room with Shi Mei. But hearing this choice come out of Chu Wanning's mouth somehow left him profoundly infuriated.

He was utterly unaware of this, but he was just like a stray pup with an exaggerated opinion of his own importance. This stray pup had met a man who wasn't exactly the nicest to him, but who at every meal would at least toss him some bones to gnaw on. But the stray pup disliked this mean fellow. He chewed on his bones and, when done, would only lick his paw and bark endlessly at the man. He absolutely didn't think of this guy as his owner.

But one day, for some reason unknown to the pup, when the man came out with a bowl in hand, it no longer held one of the bones with which he was familiar. Instead, it was full of millet seeds. A beautiful bird with bright plumage flew down and perched on the man's shoulder, beady eyes staring at him as it rubbed its beak affectionately against his cheek. The man turned to look to the side, patting the bird while patiently feeding it.

The stray pup was dumbfounded. After all, he had been so certain that Chu Wanning would choose him…

Chapter 35:
This Venerable One Slips

THAT NIGHT, Mo Ran stared at the wall, cheek propped up in his hand. On the other side of that wall was Chu Wanning and Xue Meng's room.

Shi Mei was fastidious and had left a change of clothes folded neatly on the bed before going downstairs to ask the attendant to bring up hot water for a bath. The walls of the inn weren't especially soundproof. In the quiet, Mo Ran could faintly hear the sounds coming from the adjacent room.

Chu Wanning seemed to have said something. Mo Ran couldn't hear him clearly, but he heard Xue Meng's voice loud and clear.

"Seems a little tight."

Mo Ran's ears perked up like a dog's, twitching a little.

On the other side of the wall, the little phoenix asked, "Shizun, does it hurt?"

"It's fine. You can keep going."

"I'll be gentle; let me know if it does start to hurt."

"You talk too much. Do it or don't."

Mo Ran's eyes widened in alarm.

Surely there was no way, no how—not between those two. But what kind of exchange was *that*? What were they *doing*?

The pup's ears were practically pressed against the wall. There was the faint sound of clothes rustling, and if he strained, he could even hear Chu Wanning's stifled groans.

He had heard Chu Wanning make this kind of sound in bed countless times. That shizun of his didn't like to make any noise at all, no matter whether it felt really good or really painful; he always bit down hard on his lower lip as unshed tears gathered in his eyes. At such times, all Mo Ran had to do was push just a bit harder to rip soft, panting breaths from his throat…

"W-wait." Chu Wanning's voice was low and rough. "Don't…touch

me there."

"All right." Xue Meng hesitated, then said in a small voice, "Then… Shizun will do it himself?"

"Mn."

Touch *where*? What nonsense was this? Don't touch him where? Do what himself? Just what were they doing?!

Mo Ran's face darkened. By the time he realized what he was doing, he was knocking on the door to the neighboring room.

A flurry of hurried noises came from inside.

The pup's expression grew even darker. "Shizun," he called, "what are you—"

The door opened with a creak. Xue Meng stood there, fully dressed, hand still holding a piece of bloodstained gauze. He narrowed his eyes as he glared at Mo Ran in confusion. "What do you want, making such a ruckus so late at night? Did you trip over a ghost or something?"

Mo Ran's mouth opened, then closed stupidly. He glanced past Xue Meng to where Chu Wanning sat by the table, upon which lay medicinal salve and fresh bandages. "What were you guys…"

Xue Meng continued glaring. "Applying medicine, of course. Shizun's shoulder hasn't healed yet. The dressing hadn't been changed for a few days, and some of the wounds got infected again."

"Th-then what was too tight…?" Mo Ran asked dumbly.

"Too tight?" Xue Meng thought for a while, eyebrows drawn together. "Oh, the bandages. They were wrapped too tightly before; blood stuck some bits to the wounds and they almost wouldn't come off." Suddenly, he stopped talking and eyed Mo Ran with suspicion. "Were you eavesdropping?"

Mo Ran rolled his eyes and scrambled to save his sorry face. "Who's eavesdropping? The walls are so thin, you can hear someone breathing even if you only lean against them. Go see for yourself if you don't believe me."

"Oh. Really?" Xue Meng nodded, but then belatedly felt like something was off. "Wait, how do you know that? Were you leaning against the wall to listen?"

Mo Ran couldn't immediately respond.

"Mo Weiyu, you are such a freak!" Xue Meng said angrily.

"Who knows what beastly things you might have been doing to Shizun?!" Mo Ran, replied, just as angrily.

Xue Meng was a pure person who knew nothing of such matters. He had no idea what Mo Ran was implying, so he only got angrier. "What nonsense are you yapping about?!" He turned to complain. "Shizun, he—"

Chu Wanning put on his outer robe, holding it closed with one hand while straightening his hair with the other. He calmly walked over and looked Mo Ran up and down. "Did you need something?"

"I… I heard…" Mo Ran fumbled for the words. "Um, that is, I thought Xue Meng was bullying you…"

"What?" Chu Wanning didn't understand at all. His eyes narrowed. "Who's bullying me?"

Mo Ran wanted to slap himself.

They were in the middle of staring awkwardly at one another when Shi Mei came upstairs.

"A-Ran? What are you doing outside Shizun's room?"

"I…uh…" Mo Ran stammered. "That, um, there was a misunderstanding."

Shi Mei smiled. "Well, has it been resolved?"

"Yeah, yeah," Mo Ran said hurriedly. "Shi Mei, didn't you go ask the attendant for hot water? Shizun probably hasn't bathed yet either; I'll go ask them to bring extra."

"No need." Shi Mei produced four bamboo tablets, still smiling. "The attendant said there's a natural hot spring by the inn, which the innkeeper converted into a bath. These tablets are passes. I got one for everyone."

Mo Ran felt that he, being a cutsleeve,[20] probably shouldn't go soak in the hot spring with the other three. Xue Meng was whatever. Shi Mei was, in Mo Ran's eyes, pure and divine, and he dared not even conceive of dirty thoughts about him. But Chu Wanning…

From the handful of incidences of close contact they'd had since Mo

Ran's rebirth, he was well aware that if he saw that person in a state of undress, he would probably lose his mind.

Mo Ran covered his face with a hand. "I'll pass."

"You don't bathe before bed? Gross!" Xue Meng said, shocked.

"I'll ask the attendant to send up some hot water," said Mo Ran.

Shi Mei was baffled. "They don't boil bathwater here, since all the guests go to the hot spring."

Left with no other choice, Mo Ran could only grab a change of clothes and go to the hot spring along with everyone else.

The inn was pretty diligent when it came to currying favor. They knew that most people who stayed with them were cultivators headed to Jincheng Lake in hopes of obtaining a weapon. So, they had named the bath "Daybreak's Reflection in Jincheng" to invite luck.

Mo Ran was scared stiff of losing his senses, too afraid to so much as accidentally brush against the others. Instead, he changed in a rush, wrapped the towel tightly around his waist, and ran off by himself to the hot spring to find a secluded spot.

It was already rather late, so there weren't many people in the bath. The ones who were there were scattered a distance away. With a square of white towel on top of his head, Mo Ran sank into the water, leaving only half his face above it, and let out a long breath, listening to the *glug-glug* sound as he blew bubbles.

The first person to finish changing strode out with long, bare legs. Mo Ran snuck a glance and let out a breath of relief. Thank the gods—it was only Xue Meng.

Xue-gongzi might have been handsome, but no matter how you cut it, he wasn't Taxian-jun's type. Their gazes met, and Xue Meng pointed at him. "You. Stay away from me."

"What gives?"

"You're filthy."

Mo Ran said only, "Har har."

The bath was misty with water vapor. After a while, Xue Meng paused

in the middle of scrubbing himself to call out, “Shizun, over here!”

Mo Ran, with his face half-underwater, nearly choked. He knew damn well that he shouldn’t look, but his gaze couldn’t help but wander.

That single glance nearly killed him. He was so startled that he swallowed two whole mouthfuls of bathwater and didn’t even have time to be grossed out. Instead he hurried to sink even deeper into the spring, until only his eyes remained above it.

He totally hadn’t expected Chu Wanning and Shi Mei to come out *together*.

Shi Mei was slender and beautiful in a soft way, with long, ink-black hair draped over his shoulders and wrapped in a towel. By all rights, Mo Ran should’ve wanted to sneak a look at him more than anything, but his glance darted quickly past him. He sincerely respected Shi Mei like the bright moon above and dared not stare at him in public.

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, was tall and coldly handsome, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, a toned body and supple skin. He had his hair up in a high ponytail and wore a large white bathrobe that covered his whole body except for the front, where the robe couldn’t quite be pulled close and revealed an expanse of smooth, firm chest.

As Mo Ran stared at him, he felt like he was going to suffocate and boil in the water. He wanted to look away, but his traitorous eyes refused to listen and fixed themselves on Chu Wanning without moving even the slightest bit. His ears slowly turned red.

Through the heavy steam, Chu Wanning seemed to have glanced at him, or perhaps not. He cast a waterproofing barrier over his bandages and stepped into the water. His legs were visible amidst the floating robe, long and slender, balanced with tight contours.

Mo Ran really couldn’t take any more. He closed his eyes to sink all the way into the water. Even though he was covered by a towel wrapped around his waist, his reaction was all too clear…

Mo Ran felt extremely wronged. He honestly didn’t like Chu Wanning —he in fact *hated* Chu Wanning. But his body remembered their fervent lovemaking, those frenzied entanglements that had turned even bones of steel tender. All of the absurd things they had shared made his face redden and his

heart race.

The jut of Mo Ran's throat bobbed as a celestial war raged within him. He felt like he was about to cry. For the first time in his life, he loathed himself—why was he *like* this? Shi Mei was right there. What the fuck was he doing, losing his damn mind over *Chu Wanning*?

Even if they had once pressed themselves together, skin to skin, as they intertwined in their previous life—all of that was in the past. Even if he was hung up on Chu Wanning's body, how could he do this to Shi Mei? This was utterly disrespectful to him. He deserved better.

Mo Ran lowered his head and focused on dispelling these wicked thoughts for quite a while before finally managing to suppress the fire in his abdomen. He burst out of the water and shook off the droplets, wiped his face with a towel, and opened his watery eyes.

And came face-to-face with Chu Wanning.

Even worse, the water he had just shaken off splashed right onto Chu Wanning's face. He watched as a droplet leisurely made its way down into Chu Wanning's sharp black eyebrow, and then slowly slid lower, nearly slipping into that beautiful phoenix eye.

An awkward silence bloomed between them.

This was the actual worst. Mo Ran hadn't been able to see his surroundings when he was submerged underwater and holding his breath.

Chu Wanning also hadn't realized Mo Ran was under the water at that location. He had just been minding his own business, moving to fetch the box of fragrance bars. He didn't even reach the box before he was splashed with a face full of water.

The hot spring was quite deep, the water exceptionally buoyant. Mo Ran, head swimming, tried to back away, but instead, he ended up slipping and falling right into Chu Wanning's arms instead.

"Ah!"

Chapter 36:
This Venerable One Has Probably Lost His Mind

WITHOUT THINKING, Chu Wanning reached out to steady Mo Ran. As the two of them stood plastered against each other in the warm spring water, Mo Ran felt a spark run through his entire body as goosebumps crawled up his skin.

Even though he'd already held a near-naked Chu Wanning in the Red Lotus Pavilion, the circumstances at the time had been dire. There had been no time to dwell on the situation, so he hadn't thought much of it.

Now, with one hand against Chu Wanning's chest and the other unconsciously supporting his shizun's waist, their legs tangled together under the water, and with the spring making their skin feel warmer and more slippery, Mo Ran's head all but exploded.

Upon making contact with Chu Wanning… Even though he'd done nothing but touch his waist… His body reacted with the intensity of a rushing river.

"Sh-shizun, I—" Mo Ran frantically tried to get up and away, and in the struggle, his red-hot lower parts made contact with the other man.

Chu Wanning's eyes widened, his beautiful face stricken with horror, and he rapidly backed away. At the same time, the droplet of water that had been clinging to his eyelashes slid into his eye. He grew more and more agitated, squeezing his eyes shut and rubbing at them, but he didn't have a bath towel with which to wipe away the water.

"Shizun—u-use mine." Mo Ran's face burned red, mortified to absolute death. Still trying his best to pretend that nothing was wrong, he used his own towel to wipe the water droplets off of Chu Wanning's face.

When Chu Wanning finally opened his phoenix eyes again, he still had a baffled look of distress, under which lay a hint of panic. It only lasted a moment before he quickly forced himself to calm down. He pretended he hadn't felt anything at all. "The fragrance bar," he said tightly. "Pass it to me."

"Oh…oh, okay."

Mo Ran crab walked stiffly to the edge of the pool and picked up the box of fragrance bars sitting on the edge.

"What scent does—does Shizun want?"

"Whichever."

Mo Ran's head swam in a daze. After staring blankly into the box for a long time, he turned back and said with complete sincerity, "There's no scent here called 'Whichever.'"

Chu Wanning sighed heavily. "Plum blossom. And haitang."

"Okay." Mo Ran took two fragrance bars and handed them to Chu Wanning.

As soon as their fingertips touched, Mo Ran experienced another burst of tremors. No matter how badly he wanted to shake off all those memories from the past, it was impossible.

If this had been that past, he would already be fervently entwined with Chu Wanning beside the spring. A vision appeared unbidden before his eyes, of Chu Wanning half kneeling, sprawled on the ground beneath Mo Ran's fiery, ferocious passion. His shizun's eyes were half-lidded and his body trembled uncontrollably as he endured, but was still fucked into his own climax…

Mo Ran was unable to stand it anymore. These carnal desires made his eyes go bloodshot. He didn't dare look at Chu Wanning at all. Even looking at Shi Mei was safer than looking at *him*.

How…could this be? How could this happen?

Mo Ran quickly finished washing himself and, taking advantage of the fact that the other three were still soaking, said something vague to the effect of "I'm sleepy and will turn in first."

Once Mo Ran got back to his room, he bolted and locked the door. He couldn't take it anymore—he moved to relieve himself of his urges. He didn't want to think about Chu Wanning's appearance at a time like this. He even preferred the idea of soiling Shi Mei's pure image; at least that would be easier for his confused heart to accept.

But neither his body nor his mind would listen, and every sight that flashed before his eyes was that of the past him and Chu Wanning, bound together in passion. It was like this night had unlocked the floodgates, and every single torrid memory rushed back into his mind in a frenzy, racking him with devastating shudders.

Mo Ran treated himself almost roughly, as though he was on top of the other man's body and on the very edge of ruin. He threw his head back, refusing to accept it, yet his breaths came out in muddled gasps and pants. He breathed out a name without realizing it.

"Wanning…"

As he called this name, he let out a stifled grunt, shivering slightly as he came without holding anything back, covering his palm in sticky wetness…

Once he'd finished, Mo Ran leaned over to rest his forehead against the cold wall. His eyes were awash with confusion. Shame, guilt, loathing, arousal. He had never expected he would have such strong reactions to Chu Wanning even after being reborn.

Mo Ran was instantly filled with disgust toward himself. In his past life, he had never attained Shi Mei and had vented all his passion into countless other frivolous relationships. Though he had made those relationships seem like passionate love, none of them had really meant anything to him. With the candlelight extinguished, it was all just sex, all the same, no matter who it was with. Even the way his heart had moved toward Rong Jiu had been because of the man's passing resemblance to Shi Mei.

But the kinds of feelings he'd had toward Chu Wanning had been completely different. He was acutely aware of how much more intense everything had been with Chu Wanning; just *thinking* about him like that had brought Mo Ran a pleasure more profound than anything he had ever felt with a prostitute. It hadn't been just physical, it had been…

Mo Ran didn't want to continue that line of thought. He was in love with *Shi Mei*—always had been and always would be. His feelings absolutely wouldn't change.

After repeating this to himself a few times, Mo Ran calmly slowed his breathing, frowned, and squeezed his eyes shut.

He felt anxious, annoyed, and aggrieved all at once. He didn't want this.

When it came to lust, he couldn't help but think of Chu Wanning. When the lust subsided, he didn't want anything to do with Chu Wanning, didn't want to imagine so much as a hair on his head—not even a fleeting look.

Frantically, he thought to himself, almost to the point of paranoia, that the one he liked, the one he loved deeply…was Shi Mei…

Chu Wanning's mind was in a similar state of distress.

Totally unexpectedly, he had seen and, moreover, *felt* Mo Ran's desire. The young man's body was quite mature in that regard, and was already profoundly overwhelming, so hard and so hot as to be scalding once excited, like hot iron waiting to be forged.

Even though Chu Wanning had quickly molded his face into a blank slate of serenity and refused to bring anything up afterward, the encounter had made his head go numb and filled him with disbelief.

To make matters worse, his own body had reacted as well.

Fortunately, his thin face meant he always wore a bathrobe even in hot springs. It covered his whole body, and so no one had seen a thing. Otherwise, he really wouldn't have been able to show his face again.

But why would Mo Ran…?

As he lay in bed that night, Chu Wanning ruminated quietly for hours. He dared not even imagine that, maybe, Mo Ran also liked him. That sort of thought was entirely too delusional and shameful. Even the cautious thought of "Maybe Mo Ran *also* likes—"

Chu Wanning furiously pinched himself before he could even finish the thought, before the word "me" could surface in his mind. That pair of clear, bright phoenix eyes flickered as if trying to hide. He didn't dare entertain the whole thought.

Besides, his personality was harsh, he was quick to hit people, his words were venomous, he had a bad temper, and he was nowhere near as attractive as Shi Mei—and on top of all that, he was no longer young. Even if

Mo Ran liked men, he wouldn't be blind enough to like Chu Wanning.

To all appearances, Chu Wanning was aloof and haughty. But within, in truth, he'd been treated coldly by others for so long, been feared for so long, that as he walked this long and lonely road, his opinion of himself had slowly crumbled to dust.

After they woke the next day, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning met in the hallway of the inn, both harboring secrets in their hearts. They looked at each other, but neither deigned to speak first.

Ultimately, it was Mo Ran who carried on as if all was normal. He smiled at Chu Wanning. "Shizun."

Chu Wanning was relieved, as he really hadn't known how else to deal with this situation. But as Mo Ran had chosen not to mention anything that had happened the night before, he was perfectly content to go along with it. He nodded once, lightly. "Since you're up, go wake Shi Mei as well. Let's pack and depart for Dawning Peak."

Dawning Peak was covered in snow all year round and exceedingly cold. Even for a cultivator, it was difficult to withstand such frigid weather. Chu Wanning went to a tailor to buy winter cloaks and gloves for his disciples to wear when it got particularly freezing.

The shopkeeper, smoking from her pipe with her scarlet lips as she smiled and welcomed customers, took one look at Mo Ran and said, "What a handsome little xianjun! Look at this black cape with a golden dragon on it; the embroidery is of the highest quality. The eyes alone took me more than three months to complete!"

Mo Ran gave her an embarrassed laugh. "Jiejie's words are very sweet, but I'm just going into the mountains to seek a weapon. There's no need for me to wear something so ornate and formal."

When this prospect failed, the shopkeeper instead took hold of Shi Mei. "Oh, this young xianjun is lovely beyond compare, even more so than the most gorgeous girl in this city! Xianjun, I think this red butterfly and peony cloak would suit you perfectly. How about you give it a try?"

Shi Mei forced a smile. "Ma'am, isn't this a woman's cloak?"

Xue Meng hated shopping for clothes, so he'd refused to come along and was waiting outside. Chu Wanning chose a black cloak with purple trim for him, with white rabbit fur that lined the hood.

"Xianjun, this cloak is a bit small for you," said the shopkeeper. "It would be better suited for a teenager."

"It's for my disciple," Chu Wanning said tonelessly.

"Oh, ooh!" The shopkeeper realized her mistake and quickly smiled. "What a wonderful teacher."

It might have been the first time Chu Wanning had been called a "wonderful teacher." He went still and his face betrayed nothing, but his steps were out of sync when he walked away, right arm moving with right leg and so on for quite a few steps.

Mo Ran ended up choosing an ashen-colored cloak, Shi Mei a moonlight-white one, and Chu Wanning a plain white one, as well as the black cloak with purple trim. After they made their purchases, they went back to Xue Meng.

When Xue Meng saw his cloak, his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning asked, not understanding his reaction.

"I-It's nothing."

When Chu Wanning walked far enough away that Xue Meng thought he couldn't hear, he looked at the trim on the cloak and muttered, "Purple? I don't like purple."[21]

He didn't expect to hear Chu Wanning's voice say sharply, "Such nonsense. If you won't wear it, you can climb up naked."

Xue Meng fell silent.

They went at a leisurely pace for the last leg of their journey, and before nightfall, they reached the foot of Dawning Peak.

The mountain was rich in spiritual power and home to many beasts and monsters. Even cultivators didn't dare rush up it carelessly unless they were significantly strong.

However, since Chu Wanning was with them, they didn't have to worry about such things. Chu Wanning conjured three Nightglow Haitang

Blossoms from thin air, gave them spirit-repelling properties, and tucked them into the belts of his three disciples. “Let’s go,” he said.

Mo Ran raised his head to look out at the peaks concealed under the veil of night, like a huge, ancient beast crouching deathly still. Myriad emotions poured into his heart.

In the past, it had been on Dawning Peak that he’d declared to the sun and moon, to ghosts and demons, that he, Mo Ran, was no longer satisfied with being Taxian-jun of the cultivation realm and that he was going to declare himself emperor of the entire world.

That same year, he had taken a wife and concubine at Dawning Peak. He still remembered the face of that wife, Song Qiutong, a true unparalleled beauty. From certain angles, her features had strongly resembled Shi Mei’s.

Mo Ran wasn’t a person who cared much for etiquette or honor, and he hadn’t bothered with the tedium of marriage rites. Instead, he had taken Song Qiutong’s fine hand and pulled the red-veiled woman up a flight of thousands of stairs. Together they had walked for over an hour.

Eventually, Song Qiutong’s feet had hurt too much to go on. Mo Ran had a bad temper and had lifted her veil, intending to yell at her. But, under the light of the moon, Song Qiutong’s delicate eyes and her wounded, yet resilient gaze had made her look just like a certain person—one who had long since passed.

Those scathing words had died on Mo Ran’s tongue and, after drawing a shaky breath, the words that had finally emerged were: “Shi Mei, I’ll carry you.”

In terms of seniority, if Song Qiutong had been his peer; she would indeed have been his shimei. So, she had only paused slightly at this term of address, reasoning that since Mo Ran had wiped out the entirety of Rufeng Sect, she was naturally now part of Sisheng Peak. That being the case, it wasn’t like it was incorrect for him to call her shimei, so she’d only smiled and said, “Okay.”

And so, for the last several thousand steps, Taxian-jun, Master of the Mortal Realm and Lord of the Shadows, had steadily, one foot in front of the other, carried his red-adorned bride to the peak.

There he lowered his head and watched the shape of their shadows

twist strangely over the ground and overlap each other. He laughed a little, voice hoarse as he said, “Shi Mei, I’m going to be the Master of the Mortal Realm. From this day onward, no one will be able to hurt you.”

The woman on his back didn’t know what to say to this. She hesitated a little and finally said, “Mm.”

The voice was soft. Perhaps because it was so soft, its femininity was difficult to distinguish, and it sounded muffled and ambiguous.

Not a soul could see Mo Ran’s face as his eyes grew red. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’ve made you wait for this day for far too long.”

Song Qiutong thought that Mo Ran was saying he’d had feelings for her for a long time, so she replied gently, “My husband…”

This time, the undeniably feminine voice came out clear and crisp like morning dew, pleasing to the ear. But Mo Ran’s feet jerked to a halt.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” As he started to walk again, Mo Ran’s voice lost its hoarse quality and no longer trembled. After a pause, he said, “Just call me A-Ran from now on.”

Song Qiutong was caught off guard and didn’t quite dare to address Taxian-jun in this way. “My husband, that… I’m afraid…”

“If you don’t listen to me, I’ll throw you off of this mountain!” Mo Ran snarled, violent and severe.

“A-A-Ran!” Song Qiutong quickly amended her words. “A-Ran, I was wrong.”

Mo Ran said nothing else. He lowered his head again, silently walking forward. The shadows on the ground were still only shadows. In hindsight, it was easy to see that was all they had ever been.

The things he had yearned for were nothing more than fantasies.

What he had was nothing more than an illusion.

In the end, it was all just wishful thinking.

“Shi Mei.”

“Mn?” The person walking beside Mo Ran turned his head. Amidst the sounds of shifting leaves and rustling grass, the light of the moon illuminated that person’s lovely face. “A-Ran, what is it?”

“Are you…tired from walking?” Mo Ran glanced at Chu Wanning and Xue Meng, who were walking in front of them, and whispered, “If you’re tired, how about I carry you?”

Before Shi Mei could reply, Chu Wanning turned his head to look back at them. He glared dourly at Mo Ran. “Are Shi Mingjing’s legs broken? Does he need you to carry him?”

“Shizun,” Shi Mei said hurriedly, “A-Ran was just joking, don’t be angry.”

Chu Wanning frowned, eyebrows drawing together into a severe expression. Sparks practically flew from his glower. “Ridiculous. What could I possibly be angry about?”

Done speaking, he whirled back around with a flick of his sleeve.

Mo Ran and Shi Mei exchanged a look.

“Shizun seems mad…”

“You know how he is,” Mo Ran whispered into Shi Mei’s ear. “Super petty. He’s all cold-blooded and heartless, and he won’t even let other people be nice to each other.” He wrinkled his nose and lowered his voice even further, concluding, “He’s seriously the worst.”

Suddenly, Chu Wanning’s voice rang out from in front of them. “Mo Weiyu, one more word, and I’ll toss you down this mountain!”

Mo Ran shut his mouth obediently, but he secretly grinned over at Shi Mei and mouthed, *See? What’d I say?*

Chapter 37:
This Venerable One Meets a God

"COLD MOONLIGHT upon frosty snow; frozen mountain embracing icy lake. Here lie heights insurmountable; here lies the edge of the world." Xue Meng, hands clad in deerskin gloves, wiped snow off of the large boulder and read the cinnabar inscription upon it out loud. He looked back gleefully. "Shizun, we're here."

It snowed on Dawning Peak all year round. At the moment, a majestic moon hung full in the sky, and it cast a crisp, shimmering glow over the icy lake as the frigid air blew bleak and chilly. Jincheng Lake was frozen over; no snow lay upon it, and its surface was pearlescent beneath the heavenly expanse of the starry skies. It spread across the horizon, the reflection of the stars glittering within it as if they'd come down from the heavens above —breathtakingly beautiful. This pristine, snowy landscape really did leave them feeling like they had arrived at the very edge of the world.

The group reached the edge of the lake. The surface was mirror-smooth and shimmered with a sublime otherworldly light. A stone embankment stretched out over the lake toward its center, and next to it stood a frost-covered stone tablet. Intersecting patterns spread over the stone, and the words "The Path Forward is Difficult" were written upon it in stark, powerful

calligraphy. After thousands of years, the words were still clear; it seemed like they were often repainted.

Chu Wanning stopped in front of the stone embankment. "Only one person at a time can go to the lake to seek a weapon. Which of you will go first?"

Xue Meng could hardly contain himself before blurting out, "Shizun, I'll go first!"

Chu Wanning looked at him, thought it over, and shook his head. "You're too rash. I don't think that's a good idea."

At this, Shi Mei, who had been standing by the side, laughed a little. "Shizun, how about I go in first, since I probably won't be able to break

through the ice anyway?”

Shi Mei walked along the stone embankment, which was wide enough for only a single person at a time, and slowly made his way to the end. Following procedure, he produced a ball of spiritual energy in his hand and leaned forward to place his palm against the ice. His spiritual energy traveled ceaselessly down along the lake surface, the glistening white light of his power flickering into the distance.

Mo Ran stood from afar and held his breath, hands unconsciously clenching into fists.

But no matter how long Shi Mei tried, the ice didn’t budge a mote. He forced a smile as he gave up and walked back. “Shizun, my apologies,” he said to Chu Wanning.

“No matter. Try again after cultivating a few more years.”

Mo Ran sighed a little, somehow more disappointed than either of them, but he still went to comfort Shi Mei. “It’s fine, there will be more opportunities. I’ll come with you the next time you try.”

“Enough with the chitchat,” said Chu Wanning. “Step up. It’s your turn now.”

In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, he had gone to seek his holy weapon during the most carefree days of his youth, and he’d had nothing but boundless enthusiasm at the prospect. But in this lifetime, it was nothing more than a pickup; he knew what awaited him, and he had none of that prior anxiety or eagerness. He did, however, have something of a warm feeling—the anticipation of a reunion with an old friend.

Mo Ran walked along the stone embankment and knelt before the icy lake. Bending down, he pressed his palm against the ice. He closed his eyes.

His scabbardless long blade… That sinful, vicious blade had been his constant companion, had seen all the sights of the world at his side, had tasted all the blood of the mortal realm as he had.

Mo Ran opened his eyes and whispered to the surface of the lake, “Bugui, I’m here.”

As if sensing the call of its destined master, an enormous black shadow

swiftly appeared under the frozen sheet of Jincheng Lake. The shadows gathered under the ice, becoming more and more clear, more and more vivid.

In a sudden cacophony, thousands of feet of ice shattered, and Mo Ran heard Xue Meng's distant shout of alarm from the shore.

"The ice is gone!"

The lake water surged up, waves crashing. A massive turquoise-black dragon breached, each scale on its body nearly seven feet wide. In an instant, Jincheng Lake's became a churning mass of waves, and a heavy fog rolled over them. The dragon glinted brilliantly under the moonlight as breath spouted from its nostrils.

At the same time, an ancient barrier fell over the edge of the lake, separating Mo Ran from his peers and Chu Wanning.

Within the barrier, human and dragon regarded each other. Mo Ran squinted his eyes and raised his head, peering up through the misty spray at the dragon.

The dragon held in its jaws a pitch-black blade with no scabbard. Though time-worn and plain, the blade was sharp, able to slice with ease through steel and gold alike. The dragon shrunk the blade to a size that a human could wield and slowly lowered its radiant, vibrant serpentine body to the ground to place the blade in front of Mo Ran.

However, it didn't lift its head right away. Instead it turned its golden eyes, each as large as twice the height of a fully grown man, to stare at Mo Ran. The dragon's eyes were like two great, bronze mirrors, and Mo Ran's reflection shone clearly within them. Mo Ran stood still with bated breath, waiting for it to speak.

If nothing had changed, he would only be asked to retrieve a plum blossom from the foot of the mountain and bring it back. Ultimately, because the old dragon sought only peace and elegance, he'd been let off easy.

Who could've predicted that, after waiting for so long, this dragon wouldn't do as it had in their previous lifetime and so easily yield Mo Ran's weapon? The dragon's beard fluttered as it narrowed its enormous golden eyes, then it lifted its front claw to write two words in the snow before Mo Ran: *Mortal one?*

Mo Ran was taken aback. He clearly remembered that in his previous lifetime, the dragon had been able to speak. Why, in this life, was it mute?

After writing those two words, the mute dragon promptly wiped the writing away with its scaly claw to write another sentence: *No, a mortal would not have such strong spiritual energy. Then are you a divine being?*

Mo Ran was speechless.

The old dragon thought for a moment, then swiped its claw once more and wrote: *Not a divine being; there is an evil energy in you. Then are you a kind of demon?*

What kind of nonsense is this?! Mo Ran yelled in his head. *This venerable one was just reborn—what's there to think about? Just hand over this venerable one's blade already!*

The old dragon seemed to sense his impatience and suddenly lifted its scaly claws to trap the blade beneath its foot. With one foot on the blade, it used the other to wipe away its writing and continue on another patch of

snow: *No need to take offense. I perceive two other shadows in your body. I have never seen anything like this in my life. So tell me, are you a human or a ghost? Divine or demonic?*

Mo Ran raised an eyebrow. “I’m a human, of course. Is that something that even needs to be said?”

Well, a human who’s died once before, he thought.

The old dragon paused for a moment, then wrote: *One human soul, split like so. Such a thing has truly never been seen before. It is unheard of.*

As Mo Ran watched the dragon sway sluggishly back and forth in a puzzled and almost slow-witted manner, he couldn’t help but find it funny. “What’s so strange about it? Anyway, Qianbei, what’ll it take for you to give me this blade of yours?”

The old dragon sized him up for a while and wrote: *Stand there and don’t move. Let me use a technique to peer into your soul, and then I’ll give the blade to you. How about that?*

Mo Ran hadn’t expected to receive such a request. Under that profound stare, he started to feel a little hesitant. He wondered whether this old thing could really see into his past life. What would happen if it could?

But Bugui was right in front of him. This blade was powerful and unusually strong for a holy weapon. If he refused it now, he would never have a second chance to get his hands on it.

After hesitating for a moment, Mo Ran looked up. “That’s fine and all, but Qianbei, will you give me the blade no matter what you see inside of me?”

The old dragon drew on the ground: *These are the terms; I will naturally follow through on my words.*

“No matter whether I was good or evil in the past?”

The old dragon paused for a moment, and then wrote: *Even if you were evil in the past, I will not stop you. I can only hope that you will pursue goodness in the future.*

Mo Ran clapped his hands together and smiled. “All right, if Qianbei says so, I don’t have any objections. Please examine me all you like, Qianbei.”

The old dragon lifted itself slightly. Its luminous, serpentine body bowed, it blew a breath from its nostrils, and its eyes emitted a bright red glow.

Mo Ran raised his head and realized that the red glow was, in fact, a hazy mist. As the bloodred mist thickened, it gradually concealed his reflection in the dragon's eyes. After a few moments, the fog slowly dissipated, revealing Mo Ran's image once more.

But this time, Mo Ran was astounded to find that his reflection in the dragon's eyes was not alone. Faintly visible behind him were two additional hazy, indistinct shadows, one to his left, one to his right.

Mo Ran whipped around in shock, but behind him there was only emptiness and the unceasingly falling snow. Where had the other figures come from?

As he turned back again, he saw the figures in the dragon's eyes become clearer and clearer, like something submerged in water slowly rising to the surface. Mo Ran kept staring and to his surprise realized that the two silhouettes were extremely familiar, though their eyes were closed. He couldn't stop himself from taking a step forward. All at once, the two figures opened those eyes.

Shi Mei!

Chu Wanning?!

He never would have expected them. Stunned, Mo Ran stumbled and staggered backward, stuttering so hard that he couldn't form whole sentences. "How—is this—"

The three people in the old dragon's eyes stood quietly, expressions placid and devoid of emotion. They only stared into the distance.

Mo Ran was stupefied. After a moment, the bloodred fog rose again, and the figures in the dragon's eyes blurred until they finally disappeared altogether.

The old dragon blew a huff from its nose and shook out its body. Then it wrote quickly: *I cannot make sense of it. I have seen much in my lifetime, but I have never seen a person's soul with the imprints of two others upon it. Certainly it is utterly perplexing.*

"My, my soul…has their imprints on it?"

Yes. After writing that one word, the old dragon paused for a moment before continuing: *I do not know what you could have possibly endured. How deep must an obsession run, for another person to be enmeshed so inextricably in one's own soul?*

As Mo Ran stared at the messy lines in the snow, his face began to grow red as if he'd choked on something.

His obsession with Shi Mei ran so far down in his bones that learning that Shi Mei was imprinted upon his soul and that this dragon could also see him when he looked at Mo Ran didn't faze him much at all.

But…what the hell was up with Chu Wanning also being there? What kind of heartfelt obsession did he have toward Chu Wanning? Did extreme hatred count as an obsession intense enough to entangle one's soul?

This human and dragon were so immersed in contemplation that neither noticed as the surface of Jincheng Lake started to ripple unnaturally. When the water rushed up and the waves broke through, it was too late.

Jincheng Lake cleaved apart as if sliced in half by a sword. The water on both sides rushed up toward the sky until they towered so high, they blocked out all other sights. Two tightly ordered herds of beasts rushed out from between the waves. They had the bodies of leopards and the heads of oxen, and though they weren't as large as the old dragon, the horns on their heads shone with cold light, and every last claw was sharp and menacing. Although hundreds of them gathered, the old dragon displayed no fear; it only gazed at them with his golden eyes.

"What's happening?" Mo Ran asked.

The old dragon paused, then wrote: *The Exalted Gouchen*.

The instant Mo Ran read those three words, he felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. Gouchen the Exalted was the god of weaponry, lord of all the weapons in the world. This founding god had created the first sword in existence to aid Fuxi in laying waste to his demonic enemies.

That awe-inspiring primal god was actually hundreds of cows?

The thought was too horrifying for Mo Ran to accept. As he stared blankly, uncomprehending, he heard the sound of a xun coming from far

away.

The xun was an ancient instrument. Not many people of the present age knew how to play it. As the sound came closer, the raucous herd of beasts slowly stilled and bent their forelegs, one by one, until they knelt in two rows. A man, clad in splendid robes and carrying a long sword, rode atop a qilin through the path made by the beasts.

This man had a handsome face with fine features and a pleasant disposition. He stood in the wind, his robes billowing as the snow fell on him, the clay xun in his hands glossy and dark. His fingers lay lightly over the holes as he held it to his lips to play.

When the music finished on a soft note, the hundreds of oxen-like beasts suddenly dissolved into water, revealing that they had only been conjurations. The man put down the clay xun, ran his eyes over Mo Ran for a moment, and gently smiled. “What a truly a strange person—the likes of which one might never encounter in millennia. No wonder you piqued Wangyue’s interest. I am Gouchen the Exalted, who lives within Jincheng Lake. All the weapons in this lake were forged by my own hands. They are but objects of little consequence; please excuse my humble work.”

Even though the old dragon had written the name, and this man was saying it himself as well, Mo Ran couldn’t believe it. His face paled. “You’re Gouchen the Exalted?”

The man smiled patiently. “Yes, I am he.”

Mo Ran was on the verge of choking. “God of a Thousand Weapons? That guy?”

“Correct.” Gouchen the Exalted raised his brows delicately, laughter in his eyes. “The later generations do seem to call me that. How embarrassing. I only grind out a few paltry swords and tie a few little whips when I’m bored, yet people idolize me so.”

Mo Ran had no words. Strong people acting humble was the most grating thing in the world. Chu Wanning had matter-of-factly said, “I have three holy weapons,” but this Exalted Gouchen was even more irritating. He actually went around calling the weapons he created “paltry swords” and “little whips.” Why didn’t he just go ahead and call Emperor Fuxi “li’l old man” while he was at it?

Mo Ran took a while to process this and finally said, “Then—then that—then shouldn’t you be in the heavenly realm? How could you be in this… this lake…?”

“I like to fight and spar, so I often ended up disturbing the Heavenly Emperor’s peace and quiet. After being on the receiving end of his stink eye, I figured I might as well just descend.”

“Then how long have you been here?” Mo Ran asked, dumbfounded.

Gouchen the Exalted thought it over before smiling. “Not too long. Only a few hundred years.”

“A few hundred years,” Mo Ran repeated, then laughed dryly. “Doesn’t the Exalted God think that’s a bit long?”

Gouchen the Exalted’s look was placid as he smiled. He nonchalantly waved his sleeves. “It’s not that long. Besides, forging a sword for the Heavenly Emperor used up much of my spiritual power. Furthermore, staying in a realm as abundantly opulent as heaven gets rather boring; it’s much better down here.”

Although Mo Ran was extremely curious to learn more about this legendary god of weaponry, it wasn’t really his place to keep prodding about personal affairs. He thought about it and decided there were more important matters at hand, so instead he said, “Exalted Elder, you didn’t just come out to see me today just because you thought my soul was special, right?”

“Why not? Your spiritual power is rare, the sort one hardly ever comes across.” Gouchen the Exalted smiled. “I worry that if I give you this blade, it would be wasted potential.”

“Ha ha, it’s not too bad,” Mo Ran replied. “This blade seems like it would suit me.”

“I thought so at first too,” Gouchen the Exalted continued, still smiling. “But upon closer examination, I found that this isn’t the case. You have a rare talent, so you piqued my interest. I came here today because I wanted to invite you to the bottom of the lake to chat. I would like to see which among those millions of blades would best suit you.”

Mo Ran was speechless.

This was no small matter in and of itself. Even though Taxian-jun had

experienced a whole array of things in his life, this made him choke. The God of a Thousand Weapons was actually inviting him to…pick one of those weapons?

Gouchen the Exalted took Mo Ran's silence to mean he was reluctant to go due to fear. "There's no need to worry; even though many monsters await under the water, they all answer to me. I guarantee they will not harm you. Wangyue will testify to this."

The old dragon said nothing, but slowly bowed at his side.

When Mo Ran realized that he really was being given a genuine invitation, his heart couldn't help but jolt. "Then, if I go, would the Exalted God grant me a request?"

"What manner of request?"

"The person who sought a weapon before me is a close friend of mine." As Mo Ran spoke, he gestured to the shores beyond the barrier, pointing out Shi Mei. "He was denied just now, so I'm thinking, if I grant the Exalted God's wish, then would the Exalted God grant me a wish in return and give him a weapon?"

"Is that all? Something like that is nothing to me." Gouchen the Exalted laughed. He flicked his hand, and the ancient barrier covering the sky swiftly disappeared. "This is a very simple matter. Let all three of them come, then. If any weapon catches their eyes, it is as good as theirs."

Mo Ran was delighted by this unexpected turn of events. He'd never thought that he would so effortlessly come across a way to solve the issue with which he had been wrestling. He was more excited at the possibility of Shi Mei receiving a holy weapon than by the prospect of his own upgrade. He quickly agreed to the Exalted Gouchen's invitation and brought the others over. As he relayed what was going on, Shi Mei and Xue Meng's eyes grew larger and larger, and even Chu Wanning reacted slightly.

Gouchen the Exalted watched from the side, but as if he'd realized something, he let out a, "Hm?" and stared at Chu Wanning. "You?"

Chapter 38:
This Venerable One Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

CHU WANNING'S INDIFFERENCE extended even to gods and immortals. "Does the Exalted God recognize me?" he asked mildly.

"How could I not?" Gouchen smiled in his refined manner. "Many years ago, when you came to Jincheng Lake in search of a weapon, the depth and purity of your spiritual strength was such that I almost couldn't resist coming out to see you. So how is it? Is the weapon to your liking?"

"Which weapon is the Exalted God referring to?"

"Ah." Gouchen startled slightly, then said with a smile, "How absentminded of me, to forget that I gave you two."

"No matter," said Chu Wanning. "Tianwen works very well."

"Tianwen?"

"The willow vine."

"Oh. I see." Gouchen smiled. "So you named it Tianwen? And what about the other one? What's that one called?"

"Jiuge." answered Chu Wanning.

"And how is Jiuge?"

"It has a chilling temperament; I rarely use it."

"What a shame." Gouchen sighed. Done chatting, he turned around. "Wangyue, I'll be taking them down below. It's not good for you to be up here above the water where the spiritual energy is so thin; you should head back soon too."

The old dragon nodded, raising a large wave as it dove back into the lake, scales glittering.

Meanwhile, Chu Wanning busied himself with casting water-repelling charms on his three students.

Gouchen the Exalted watched him with interest, thinking, *Such a level*

of proficiency is rare amongst cultivators. I wonder who his teacher is?

But Chu Wanning had an aloof air that didn't welcome small talk, and Gouchen the Exalted knew better than to pry.

Once all the preparations had been made, the group waded into the freezing waters of Jincheng Lake together. Owing to the charm, they moved unhindered in water as if on land. As they approached the depths, a boundless underwater world slowly came into view.

The bottom of the lake was covered in fine white sand. Aquatic plants drifted gently in the flow, and row upon row of finely detailed buildings lined the crisscrossing paths. All manner of monsters and beasts came and went on the streets and in the alleys; in this place, even creatures that couldn't normally coexist lived in harmony.

"Jincheng Lake has plentiful spiritual energy and can thus be said to be a kind of paradise," said Gouchen. "The creatures who make their homes here stay for generations without ever leaving, so many of their customs are quite a bit different from what you might expect to encounter in the mortal realm. You're welcome to look around if you wish."

As he spoke, a snow-white rabbit spirit with scarlet eyes rode past on a tiger. The rabbit was dressed in white robes, all pomp and poise with an arrogant look as it ceaselessly berated the tiger to go faster. The tiger, on the other hand, was meek and obedient without so much as a hint of dignity.

The group watched, speechless.

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Gouchen the Exalted led them along the main path. Countless shops crowded both sides of the street, and all kinds of creatures passed them by. Soon enough, they arrived at the center of the city. Even more demons were gathered there, making for quite a strange sight.

"Jincheng Lake rarely has contact with the outside world, but you can barter for nearly anything you need here."

"Legend has it that Jincheng Lake was formed from your blood," said Xue Meng. "Wouldn't that make you the master of this place, then, since it's your spiritual energy that sustains everything here?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Gouchen smiled a little. "Besides, that's all in the past. I left the realm of the gods long ago, and my spiritual strength is nothing like what it used to be. Thinking back on those heaven- and earth-shattering events now, they seem almost like they happened in a dream. How are any of them related to my current self? These days, I'm a mere swordsmith."

He showed them around the city center as he spoke. The creatures at the bottom of the lake, having lived with Gouchen the Exalted all this time, seemed to have forgotten his status as a founding god. They didn't react much even when he walked by them, busy as they were with minding their own business and peddling their wares.

"Fish-blood mantou, freshly made!"

"Skin of Shuairan Snake, premium clothing material, only three feet left! Once it's all gone, you'll have to wait for my next shedding!"

"Selling squid ink brow-filler, made with fresh ink, spat just this morning by yours truly. It'll do wonders for your eyebrows—hey! Hey wait, miss, don't leave!"

The market was inundated with the sounds of various creatures hawking their wares, and the unusual sights were no less worthy of marvel.

A headless ghost sat by its stall, selling combs and makeup. It held a comb between two fingers with long, scarlet-painted nails as it brushed the hair on its own still-bleeding head, which rested on its knees. "High-quality bone combs," it called in a soft voice. "Take one home with you today."

Xue Meng's eyes were wide as he glanced left and right. He saw an

apothecary to the side staffed by merfolk that sold all kinds of medicinal herbs that he'd never even seen before. He was just about to go over and see if he could bring some home for his mother when an ear-piercingly shrill voice rang out from behind him.

"Make way, make way! Let me through!"

Xue Meng's foot froze mid-step, but when he turned to look, there was no one there.

Gouchen smiled. "Look carefully. Under your foot."

Sure enough, Xue Meng squinted and spied a pile of tiny rocks moving on its own. "Well, that's new," he mumbled. "Even rocks can walk here. Is it a rock spirit or something?"

"Fuban," Chu Wanning corrected.

"Full bar?"

Chu Wanning shot him a mild look. "It's one thing for Mo Ran to not pay attention in class, but you too?"

Xue Meng was the sort to dive headlong into the practice of martial arts with his whole being—while paying absolutely no heed whatsoever to things like literature and history. In fear of his shizun's imposing aura, he sat straight and proper during Chu Wanning's lectures, but everything went in one ear and out the other. His entire face burned at having been caught in the act by that same shizun.

Mo Ran put his hands together, laughing. "Shizun isn't being fair to me; I totally listened to that lecture."

Xue Meng wasn't about to back down. "Oh yeah? Go on and explain it then."

"A fuban is a type of bug that's exceptionally greedy by nature. It tries to gather up any and all pretty rocks it sees, and it usually ends up crushed to death under that pile." Mo Ran looked expectantly at Chu Wanning with a grin on his face. "Shizun, am I right?"

Chu Wanning nodded. "The fuban has gone extinct in the outside world. I didn't expect to see one here."

"This one just lucked out," Gouchen explained with a smile. "It's only

still alive thanks to the local apothecary. Watch, here he comes."

They observed the fuban trudge to the steps of the apothecary with great effort, where it yelled, "I can't take it anymore! Hurry and save me, Doctor!"

A turquoise sea dragon swiftly swam forward. He was clearly used to handling this situation, and he smiled leisurely as he took out a white porcelain bottle. He poured a golden-red medicinal potion on the fuban like this was the most normal occurrence. "Hello, Foolish Old Man. Good harvest today?"

The so-called Foolish Old Man huffed, tone lazy while it enjoyed the medicinal bath. "Hmph, not too bad, not too bad. One hundred more tomorrow, and I'll have four hundred million, eighty-five thousand, six hundred and seventeen rocks at home."

Both Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were at a loss for words.

"That's…quite a hoard," mumbled Shi Mei.

The dragon finished pouring the medicine. "Remember to come earlier tomorrow. Any later, and even this strengthening dew won't save you."

"Yeah, yeah, got it. I'll come earlier," the fuban replied half-heartedly. Then a pale-yellow rock in the corner caught its eye, and it started hollering again. "Hey, li'l eel—I meant, Dr. Dragon, might I please trouble you to put that pretty rock over there on my back? That way I'll have four-hundred million, eighty-five thousand, six hundred and eighteen rocks tomorrow."

Xue Meng couldn't resist walking over. "What do you need so many rocks for?" he asked. "Are you building a house?"

"What the—?" the fuban's shrill, conceited voice came from under the pile of rocks. "A human? Aiyo, I haven't had to look at one of you for ages. How is it any of your business why I'm gathering rocks? Of course it's not for building a house. I'm not that bored!"

Shi Mei was also curious. "What for, then, if not that?"

"To count, of course!" the fuban said self-righteously.

The group was rendered totally speechless.

In any case, after strolling around for a while, Gouchen took them back

to his residence.

In a corner of the streets they came upon an enormous seashell that stood like a folding screen against the outside world. Behind it lay a large courtyard divided into six magnificent and expansive sections. Halls and corridors led to side wings and flower gardens, and bead curtains made of pearls and kelp swayed peacefully in the water. Some of the side rooms were dark while others were lit by candlelight, and faint, barely audible notes of konghou strings and xun drifted from within.

Just like in the apothecary, all the servants of the god's residence were merfolk. Some kept their dragon tails, while others had transformed their tails into legs, preferring to walk instead. However, they didn't seem to like shoes much, as all of them were barefoot.

Upon seeing the confusion on their faces, Gouchen smiled. "I live with my good friend Wangyue, who was once the crown prince of the eastern seas," he explained airily. "These are the servants he brought with him when he took up residence here."

Wangyue was the name of that old dragon.

Mo Ran was rather fond of that black dragon, since he had acquired his holy weapon from it in his previous lifetime. "Where is he, anyway?" he couldn't help but ask, smiling. "He probably assumes a different form down here, right? He's so ginormous, I doubt he'd be able to fit in this place otherwise."

Gouchen nodded. "That's a matter of course," he said cheerily. "But he gets tired easily in his old age; he's probably retired early after having gone above water. If you want to see him again, you'll have to wait for him to wake up."

Just then, a merman with long brown hair floated over and bowed deeply to Gouchen. "Exalted God, welcome home," he said in a soft, graceful voice. "Wangyue-dianxia told this humble servant everything. Would it please the Exalted God to take his guests to the arsenal of holy weapons forthwith?"

Gouchen didn't answer at first. Instead he looked politely to his guests first and only nodded when he confirmed that they were amenable. "Yes, very well. Please have the kitchen prepare food and wine. We shall dine

when we return from the arsenal."

They passed through the courtyards to the deepest section of the seashell. In the center of this courtyard stood a massive weeping willow that towered toward the skies. The willow must have been a different species from those in the world above the lake, as its trunk was so thick that it would have taken ten adult men standing hand to hand to wrap around it. Its bark was ancient and twisting, and thousands of willow vines hung from it like an emerald curtain.

"Whoa, how old is this tree?" Xue Meng asked hoarsely.

"I haven't kept count, but at least a hundred thousand years," Gouchen replied.

"What kind of tree lives that long?" Xue Meng asked, startled.

"Trees naturally live longer than humans, and this one in particular has been nourished by the spiritual energy of Jincheng Lake, so it's not really that unexpected. Anyway, please follow closely. The entrance to the arsenal is in the hollow of this tree." Gouchen paused and looked at Xue Meng. "Please don't touch the branches. This tree has cultivated into a spirit and can feel pain."

But his words came a little too late; Xue Meng had already plucked a leaf.

"Ah!" Xue Meng yelped.

At the same time, a faint groan reverberated through the empty air, as if a raspy voice was sighing softly. "Ow."

Xue Meng paled as if struck by lightning and hurriedly flung the leaf away. "What? Why is there blood?"

Sure enough, a stream of blood trickled from the branch where the leaf had been broken off. The leaf that had been thrown aside writhed and convulsed on the ground like a living thing before gradually growing still, curling up, and rapidly withering away.

"As I said, it's a spirit," Gouchen said helplessly. "Why would the young gongzi…?" He shook his head and walked up to examine the broken branch, where he used his spiritual energy to soothe the willow and stop its bleeding.

“Xue Meng, come here,” said Chu Wanning. “Don’t touch anything else.”

“Yes, Shizun.” Knowing he’d messed up, Xue Meng walked over obediently with his head hung low.

Fortunately, this incident wasn’t too major. Chu Wanning apologized to Gouchen the Exalted who, with all the magnanimity expected of a founding god, only smiled. “The young gongzi is truly agile and swift.”

Xue Meng didn’t say a word, his face bright red as he followed behind Chu Wanning with his head hanging low.

They passed through the curtain of lush branches and arrived at the trunk itself. Up close, the willow was even more overwhelmingly colossal than it had seemed from a distance; that initial approximation of ten men was possibly a vast underestimation of its size.

There was a hollow in the trunk of the willow. Rather, it would have been more accurate to call it a huge arched gateway, wide enough for three brawny men to pass through at the same time. The hollow was blocked by numerous complicated barriers, which Gouchen dispelled one by one before turning to say with a smile, “The holy weapon arsenal is right inside. It’s kind of small and a little messy; sorry for the inconvenience.”

Mo Ran was quite curious and immediately moved to follow behind Gouchen, but Chu Wanning held him back as if by reflex. “Don’t rush,” he said mildly.

But he went in himself.

Mo Ran had long since grown used to Chu Wanning doing this sort of thing. In his previous lifetime, whenever the four of them had gone on missions to subdue demons, Chu Wanning had always walked at the vanguard. Back then, Mo Ran had thought that his shizun was impatient and arrogant, and that he didn’t want to be outdone by those younger than him. But having been reborn, the Mo Ran of the present saw things somewhat differently.

As he watched Chu Wanning’s white robes disappear into the darkness of the tree’s hollow, a thread of hesitation surfaced in his heart.

Was this person really rushing to be in the front because he was

impatient and arrogant?

Chapter 39:
This Venerable One Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

WITHIN THE TREE'S HOLLOW lay a narrow passage. They made their way along a flight of smooth stone steps, the slippery sensation underfoot seeming almost to travel from the soles of their feet to the depths of their hearts. At the end of the passage, a bright light awaited.

The Exalted Gouchen's "kind of small and a little messy" arsenal of holy weapons turned out to be of a totally different size than they had expected when they looked at it from outside. The ancient tree was enormous, but its interior was even more expansive. It seemed to encompass the heavens above and swallow the earth below. Towering shelves lined the arsenal and were packed with tens of thousands of weapons proudly on display. When they looked up, they couldn't even see the ceiling, only row upon row of racks filled with magnificent weapons. It made for a vision of boundless grandeur and untold splendor.

And in the center of the arsenal sat a crucible. Waves of blistering heat came off of the red-hot metal within it, and several unfinished weapons resting inside. Each and every weapon made by Gouchen the Exalted far surpassed the likes of the legendary weapons Zidian and Qingshuang. Where a normal weapon would have been marred by the intense, searing heat, the blades and tips of these weapons only glistened all the more, radiant and resplendent.

Even more wondrous were the various weapon parts soaring through the air on their own, moved by the ancient tree's spell arrays. These tiny decorative pieces and ornamental jewels danced overhead like so many little fairies, occasionally colliding to send sparks flying and fill the air with delightful tinkles.

Gouchen looked back with a smile. "It's a little cramped in here, huh?"

Hm, thought Shi Mei.

Cramped? Then what do you think is spacious? thought Xue Meng.

Am I allowed to say "motherfucker"? thought Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning remained impassive.

Gouchen the Exalted told Xue Meng and Shi Mei to look around and pick weapons, and that they were welcome to take whichever ones struck their fancy.

Meanwhile, Gouchen the Exalted was especially interested in Mo Ran, and so he had him try weapon after weapon. However, he found them all wanting.

"Fengming Jiaowei." Not the least bit discouraged, Gouchen handed over yet another weapon, the fourteenth so far. "Try this one."

"Um…I don't know how to play," said Mo Ran.

"No matter, just give it a strum."

This guqin was smooth and glossy on the front and scorched black on the back. Mo Ran plucked at it a couple times as instructed, but the strings unexpectedly began to vibrate, resonating with a shrill tone.

Gouchen instantly tossed Fengming aside, where a spell carried the guqin back to its stand, and exchanged it for a jade pipa.

"Let's skip this one," said Mo Ran. The pipa was an instrument much too feminine for a man like him. Something like that was better suited to those pretty boys at Kunlun Taxue Palace.

But Gouchen insisted. "Try it."

"Fine." Mo Ran had no choice but to give in and take the proffered pipa. His grievance ran a little too strong, and after only a couple of plucks, the string snapped under his hand.

Gouchen stared at that broken string and, after a long moment, said, "Do you know what that string is made of?"

"You're…not gonna make me pay for it, are you?" Mo Ran asked.

"The Wushan Goddess's white hair," Gouchen muttered. "It is of the spiritual essence of earth, impervious to sword and fire alike. But you… You…"

Mo Ran glanced backward in alarm. "Shizun! I don't have the money to pay for it!"

Chu Wanning remained silent.

Gouchen the Exalted twirled the string between his fingers, mumbling to himself. “The earth element is naturally weak to the wood element. For you to be able to destroy part of a spiritual essence of earth… Could it be that a weapon suitable for you must be of the wood element?”

“Wha—?”

“But it couldn’t be…” For some reason, Gouchen shot a glance at Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning noticed his glance. “What couldn’t be?”

Instead of answering, Gouchen the Exalted lifted his hand and waved, summoning a ceramic xun. He blew into it, and as the sound slowly faded, the space above them was split open by a bloodred summoning array. “Ji Baihua, come here.”

Mo Ran’s head snapped upward. Xue Meng and Shi Mei heard the commotion and also came over. They watched as air swirled about Gouchen’s fingertips with his power, rotating the intricate array above. From it emerged a fox spirit with fluffy, luxurious tails, accompanied by splendid lights and a shower of glittering silver.

The fox spirit circled the air and floated leisurely down to land in front of Mo Ran.

The fox spirit was quite pretty. Up close, he turned out to be a male fox spirit, with a dot of red between his eyebrows and a pair of peach-blossom eyes that were slightly lifted and delicately expressive. He was draped in ornate, finely embroidered garments and held a box of golden brocade in his hands. Glancing at Gouchen, he smiled. “Exalted God.”

“You must know what I called you for, yes?” said Gouchen.

“This humble one knows.”

“And what do you think?”

Ji Baihua smiled. “Not bad. It’s worth a try.”

The two went back and forth with each other, paying no mind at all to the four other individuals present.

Mo Ran couldn’t resist asking, “What exactly are you talking about?”

“Hm? Is the young xianjun already getting impatient?” Ji Baihua asked

with a smile. “Actually, it’s really quite interesting: I felt your spiritual energy before I appeared and thought for sure that you would be a white-haired old man. I’m surprised you’re actually a handsome young thing.”

Mo Ran had no words.

“Ji Baihua,” Gouchen the Exalted said. “The matter at hand?”

“All right, all right, I was just having a bit of fun.” Ji Baihua’s eyes narrowed, his fluffy tails swishing. “What was the matter at hand again? Aiya —don’t glare at me, Xiao-Gou. As for this thing, it’s really such a long story __”

“Then could you please make the long story short?” Mo Ran asked with a smile.

“Yep, yep. If you want the short version instead, it’s actually super short,” Ji Baihua responded, also with a smile. Using spiritual energy, he floated the brocade box in his hands over to Mo Ran. “Here, take it.”

That was indeed super short.

Mo Ran took the brocade box to weigh in his hands and turned it over to examine. The box was a scintillating gold and shrouded in a luminous gleam, but it provided no hints as to what manner of holy weapon lay inside. Moreover, the box had neither seam nor crack; its only decoration was a pair of koi fish on the top, one black and one white, each holding the tail of the other in its mouth to form the yin-yang symbol.

“How does it open?”

“Heh heh, the opening method will have to remain between the two of us,” said Ji Baihua. “No one else can know.”

“Are you trying to say that we should excuse ourselves?” Xue Meng asked.

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll just borrow this young man for a minute,” Ji Baihua replied with a smile, and he waved a hand.

Mo Ran’s sight suddenly darkened, and he found himself alone with Ji Baihua in a small, secret chamber.

“No need to be nervous, young xianjun. I just teleported us. The box holding that weapon is a magic artifact of my secret and exclusive design;

that's why I couldn't tell you how to open it in front of everyone else. I hope you understand."

Mo Ran smiled. "It's fine. But just what is this weapon, to warrant being held in such a box?"

"That, I cannot tell you," Ji Baihua said. "Holy weapons have their own temperaments. This one in particular doesn't like to let its form be known so easily. If you offend it, it will refuse to recognize you as its master—even if you do manage to open the box."

Mo Ran was speechless for a moment and could only force a smile. "What kind of weapon even… Such a strange temper. Fine, fine, tell me then: How do I open the box?"

Upon realizing that he wasn't going to force the issue, Ji Baihua found he quite approved of Mo Ran. He put his hands together with a laugh. "Since you're so straightforward, I won't beat around the bush either. This box is called Ever-Yearning. As you see, it's completely seamless. In order for it to open, two conditions must be met."

"And the conditions are?" asked Mo Ran.

"Fox spirits like us believe in fated love," answered Ji Baihua. "And so, first, there is only one person in this world who can open Ever-Yearning for you. This person will be extremely important in your life; you must love them dearly, and they must love you in return—as well as be wholly devoted to you."

Mo Ran smiled. "I see. It's a strange condition for sure, but that doesn't seem too difficult." He was confident in his feelings for Shi Mei.

But at his words, the corners of Ji Baihua's lips curved faintly upward. "How could it *not* be difficult? The heart of another has been a mystery to man since time immemorial. What you think to be true might not necessarily be so. I've lingered in this world for a long time and have seen far too many people who lost sight of their hearts, or who knew not their own most beloved. In all these thousands of years, pitifully few have ever managed to open Ever-Yearning."

"Why is that?" Mo Ran asked, surprised. "Even if you get the wrong person, can't you just try another? Even if you have to try every person you know, you'd definitely find this so-called most important person in your life

eventually, right?"

"That's where the second condition comes in," said Ji Baihua. "Aside from you, only one other person can touch Ever-Yearning. In other words, you only have one chance. If you choose the wrong person, then it will remain closed to you forever, and no one will ever be able to acquire the item within."

Mo Ran laughed. "No wonder you separated us from everyone else. It'd certainly be hard to handle if the others heard this too. How awkward would it be if they knew that whomever I offer the box to is the one I like?" He paused, playing with the brocade box in his hands. "Anyway, this thing sure is interesting. So it's basically a lock with a one-use keyhole, and the wrong key will disable it for good."

"Of course you only get one chance to open it. What did you expect?" Now Ji Baihua glared at him. "You mortals only have a mere few decades of life, yet you're so preoccupied with self-indulgence. Just how much fated love have you squandered away without realizing it? Love is not unlike this Ever-Yearning, after all. You cannot so simply take back a wrong choice."

"Ha ha, worry not, O Great Immortal Fox. Others might have chosen wrong, but I've got this in the bag." Mo Ran bowed to him and smiled. "I won't squander this yearning."

Ji Baihua shot him a look. "Don't be so sure about that, young man," he said, voice soft and graceful. "From what I can tell, you don't actually seem to know your fated person at all."

Mo Ran paused, smile frozen on his face. "What do you mean by that?"

But the handsome immortal, this self-proclaimed "believer in fated love," was unwilling to say any more. He only sighed softly. "To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch.[22] Ah…"

Mo Ran wasn't a learned man, and he didn't understand this pedantic, scholarly bullshit. But he also couldn't shake the feeling that the fox spirit was subtly trying to remind him of something. Unfortunately, however hard he tried, he was too dumb to understand just what that something might be.

He was just about to ask again when Ji Baihua, knowing that his task was complete, smiled slightly and waved a hand to send Mo Ran back into

the world.

The second Mo Ran was gone, Ji Baihua froze and became stiff. Soon after, he shattered into pieces with a crash. All that remained was a single black chess piece that fell where he'd once stood.

It was really too bad that Mo Ran never saw this. Many things at the bottom of this lake might have turned out differently, had he only done so…

When Mo Ran came to, he realized he was back at the arsenal of holy weapons where the other four were waiting for him, Ever-Yearning in his hands.

Gouchen the Exalted smiled broadly at his return. "That little fox is really too much—all this secretive ado just to open a box. Well then, do you know how to open it now?"

The moment of truth was already upon him, so either way, Mo Ran didn't have time to ponder it too deeply. He smiled. "Yeah, it's easy."

He walked up to Shi Mei, very casually. "The lock has such an interesting and clever design. You guys probably couldn't figure it out even given a whole decade. Wanna try?"

As he said so, he offered the box to Shi Mei, once again very casually.

The brocade box glittered brilliantly in front of Shi Mei, its golden glow lighting up his gentle, elegant face.

"Shi Mei, why don't you try first?" Mo Ran tried to act nonchalant, but his heart had tied itself into a knot and his palms wouldn't stop sweating.

This was a gamble on his part, one that risked his chance at acquiring a holy weapon. By all rights, he really ought to have been careful about something like this, but in fact he felt like he *was* being plenty careful. After all, he had already died once. How could he still not know just who it was he cared for?

It wasn't like he was dumb.

Shi Mei hesitated a bit, but after that, he took the proffered box.

Mo Ran's heart leapt into his throat. He stared intently, but a long

while passed, and nothing happened.

Mo Ran continued to stare dumbly.

Shi Mei carefully cradled the box as he examined it, tracing the yin-yang koi fish with his fingers. “There’s no seam at all,” he said, wondering aloud. “I can’t find a keyhole either.”

Why was there no reaction?! Shi Mei was touching Ever-Yearning, so why wasn’t anything happening? Could it be—ah! It had to be! The gloves!

With that realization, Mo Ran glanced at the deer-hide gloves on Shi Mei’s hands. He was just about to ask Shi Mei to take them off and try again when, without warning, a slender-fingered hand reached over and calmly took Ever-Yearning.

Mo Ran cried out in anguish as if he had been struck by lightning, “Shizun!”

Chu Wanning nearly jumped and almost dropped the box, but his composed exterior was ingrained all the way down to his bones, so his inner turbulence wasn’t the least bit visible on his face.

Mo Ran howled like the freshly bereaved. “Shizun!”

Goosebumps sprang up across Xue Meng’s body. “What are you wailing about?! It’s just a box! What’s wrong with you? You’re yelling like somebody stole your wife or something.”

“I—I—” Mo Ran was genuinely about to pass out from anger, but he couldn’t say the reason why. He could only cover his face and howl helplessly. “Oh god…”

Chu Wanning! Why aren’t you wearing gloves?! Why, when you’re so afraid of the cold! It’s all ice and snow out there! We’re all wearing gloves, so why are you the only one—

Mo Ran paused.

Oh…

Each of the disciples wore demon-repelling haitang flowers that had to be linked to Chu Wanning’s spiritual energy via his palms. So, Chu Wanning hadn’t even bought himself a pair of gloves to start with. The reason he wasn’t wearing gloves was to protect *them*.

But this whole time, Mo Ran had never spared him so much as a single thought. It was only now, at this crucial moment, that he noticed that Chu Wanning, the one among them most afraid of the cold, had been freezing from the start.

Mo Ran wanted to cry, but no tears came. He lamented his bad luck for having let the holy weapon slip through his fingers just like that. His chest was unspeakably tight. Then, all of a sudden, as Chu Wanning's fingers brushed past the yin-yang fish, that pair of metal koi came to life and began to weave nimbly around the box.

A beat of silence.

And then, with two crisp clicks, the yin-yang koi came together and rose to protrude from the surface, becoming a pair of handles. Chu Wanning turned the handles, and Ever-Yearning split in two to reveal a radiant object inside that emitted a golden glow.

Mo Ran was stunned. Ji Baihua's words rang in his ears.

"There is only one person in this world who can open Ever-Yearning for you. This person will be extremely important in your life; you must love them dearly, and they must love you in return—as well as be wholly devoted to you."

This person was Chu Wanning? How could it possibly be Chu Wanning?!

No way, absolutely no way in hell! How could he love Chu Wanning, and how could Chu Wanning even like him? What a joke!

This had to be a mistake. Something was wrong with the box. The box was definitely broken.

Mo Ran was still hung up on this as Chu Wanning removed the holy weapon from inside Ever-Yearning, at which point something even more startling occurred.

This time, Mo Ran wasn't the only one who was shocked; the other three were as well. Even Chu Wanning's expression flickered.

A glistening willow vine illuminated their faces, its transcendent light reflected in their eyes.

In the midst of everybody else's stupefied silence, Mo Ran choked for

quite a while before finally spitting out with much difficulty and even more disbelief: “Tianwen?!”

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Chapter 40:
This Venerable One Can*not* Believe This—*What the Hell?*

THE WEAPON INSIDE Ever-Yearning was Tianwen, or rather, a golden willow vine indistinguishable from Tianwen. It was exactly the same in every aspect, from the patterns on the vine down to the way in which it was made.

To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch.

Chu Wanning, face unreadable, handed the willow vine to Mo Ran before calling forth Tianwen in his hand. Light gathered in his palm as the weapon formed. The two weapons were as mirror images, not the slightest bit different.

No one had anticipated anything like this. Even Mo Ran couldn't believe his eyes. As someone who had been on the receiving end of Tianwen probably about a thousand times in his last life, he never could have expected to be offered an identical weapon from Jincheng Lake.

What exactly was going on?

Everyone collectively turned their gaze toward Gouchen the Exalted.

Gouchen the Exalted seemed to be surprised as well. "So at this moment, there are, in fact, two spiritual essences of wood? Existing concurrently?"

"What exactly is a 'spiritual essence of wood,' anyway?" Xue Meng asked.

"Ah, it's like this," said Gouchen. "There are five elements in the world, as you all know. When a person cultivates a spiritual core, they find themselves inherently aligned with one or two of those elements. The living person most innately resonant with a certain element can be said to be the spiritual essence of that element. For instance, the Wushan Goddess was the spiritual essence of earth of her time. But generally speaking, there can only be one spiritual essence of any particular element in each generation—and there is at present already a spiritual essence of wood, to whom I gifted the first wood elemental weapon many years ago."

His gaze landed on Chu Wanning as he spoke.

"When I forged the five supreme holy weapons, I originally planned to make only one of each element. Everything went as intended for four of the elements, but the wood elemental weapon broke in two within the forge.

"I recognized this as the will of the heavens, and so I made the two halves of the willow vine into two separate weapons. Even so, I was certain that these two weapons would never find owners at the same time. Therefore, I entrusted one to Ji Baihua and his brocade box as a precaution against any unscrupulous scheming. I never would have imagined…"

Gouchen shook his head and was about to say more when lustrous red firelight burst forth from the willow vine in Mo Ran's hand. Its golden radiance gradually changed into the scarlet of a raging inferno.

Mo Ran's thoughts were in utter disarray, and he blurted out without thinking: "Ah! What the hell?!"

Chu Wanning tried to stop him, but it was too late.

And so, both Chu Wanning and Gouchen the Exalted could only gaze at Mo Ran with pity. Mo Ran quickly realized the reason behind their looks as he remembered: A holy weapon first changed color to indicate its recognition of its owner; this was also a request for its new master to give it a name…

Unfortunately, it was too late. They watched helplessly as three characters written in exquisite and powerful calligraphy slowly appeared on the silver handle of the willow vine.

Ah! Jiangui: What the Hell.

The holy weapon "Ah! What the Hell?!"

Mo Ran was silent for a moment. Then he shrieked.

Although Xue Meng and Shi Mei didn't know much about the practice of naming holy weapons, they put two and two together easily enough.

Xue Meng doubled over in laughter, clutching his stomach with both hands and laughing so hard that he almost cried. "Only you could manage a name like that! Ha ha ha ha, good name, good name. Shizun's Tianwen and your 'Ah! What the Hell,' aha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Since Mo Ran had received his holy weapon, Xue Meng and Shi Mei also each picked out a weapon for themselves. Xue Meng chose a longsword, and Shi Mei opted for a short flute. Neither of their weapons changed color, evidently not yet willing to submit to their new masters.

But it was no matter; this was something they could figure out later.

And thus, everyone returned to the seashell estate for an evening feast in quite a good mood. Gouchen the Exalted had never brought mortals to the depths of Jincheng Lake before, and he generously invited them to stay the night before leaving. Their host spared no expense. The banquet tables were loaded with meat and wine, and energetic drumbeats accompanied their merrymaking. Everybody came out of the affair a bit tipsy.

Afterward, Gouchen had the chamberlain bring the guests to their rooms to retire for the night.

The guest rooms were adjacent to the arsenal of holy weapons. As he looked at that massive tree, Mo Ran thought of the "Jiangui" that he had just received and couldn't help but call forth the willow vine to look it over.

To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch.

Just what did that fox spirit Ji Baihua know? Why had he said something like that, and what exactly had he meant by those words?

Mo Ran was a little drunk, and the alcohol in his system had muddled his thoughts, but it just made no sense to him. If Ever-Yearning hadn't been broken, then how had Chu Wanning opened it?

Of *course* he didn't like Chu Wanning. And as for Chu Wanning being deeply in love with him… What a joke.

As he thought this, he looked back toward his shizun. Unexpectedly, Chu Wanning was also looking at him. Their eyes met, and Mo Ran's heart trembled slightly, as if it had been pricked by some sharp, tiny thing. It elicited a faint, sweet-sour kind of feeling in him. Without thinking, he beamed toothily at Chu Wanning, but the feeling lasted for only an instant before being overtaken by regret.

He obviously disliked Chu Wanning. So why was it that sometimes, when he looked at him, he felt so at peace—so warm?

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, was as impassive as ever. Seeing that Mo Ran had called out Jiangui, he thought for a moment before summoning Tianwen. Then he walked toward Mo Ran.

Jiangui seemed to have a bit of a temper. Sensing the approach of another strong wood elemental, it crackled with sparks of scarlet firelight—some splashing on Xue Meng from time to time—as if in a show of aggressive competitiveness.

In contrast, although Tianwen also seemed to have sensed the presence of another like itself, it had spent a great deal of time with Chu Wanning and taken on his mannerisms. And so, despite also being proudly combative, its golden light didn't stir into an agitated frenzy like Jiangui, but rather brightened gradually. As its master didn't disapprove, it calmly continued to brighten until it had reached a blinding brilliance. It almost seemed determined to show Jiangui the steady composure with which an exceptional weapon should greet battle.

Two holy weapons, originally one branch.

One was fresh and inexperienced, while the other was seasoned by hundreds of battles. One flared with a red light, like an impatient and excitable youngster still wet behind the ears, while the other coursed with a golden radiance, like a proud and haughty master standing atop the highest peak.

Chu Wanning glanced at the willow vine in his hand with a quiet noise of contemplation, then his gaze, sheltered by thick, lowered lashes, turned to Jiangui. "Mo Ran."

"Shizun?"

"Take up your…" It was a little embarrassing to say "Jiangui." Chu Wanning paused before eventually continuing. "Take up your willow vine. Let's have a match."

The mush in Mo Ran's brain boiled and bubbled, but he couldn't make heads or tails of it. He pinched the bridge of his nose and forced a smile. "Please don't joke like that, Shizun. Have mercy on me."

"I'll let you have the first three moves."

"I've never used a willow vine before…"

“Ten moves.”

“But—”

Without wasting any more words, Chu Wanning flicked his wrist and a flash of dazzling gold cleaved directly toward Mo Ran.

Mo Ran, who had a fear of Tianwen embedded deep into his very being, was scared shitless and swiftly raised Jiangui to block. The willow vines split the skies, entwining in midair like a pair of dragons locked in battle, sparks of gold and scarlet flying ceaselessly with the friction.

Though Mo Ran had never studied how to use this unusual weapon, he *had* watched Chu Wanning’s combat style for a long time now. This, combined with his exceptional innate talent, enabled him to actually defend against Chu Wanning’s attack, if only just barely.

Surrounded by the freezing lake water, they exchanged several dozen blows. Chu Wanning was holding back, but Mo Ran’s performance and ability to hold his own was nevertheless outstanding and exceeded his expectations.

The gold of Tianwen and the scarlet of Jiangui danced in tandem. The two willow vines ripped through the current, stirring the once-calm waters to life and tearing them apart. They left coruscating trails of light in their wake, gold and scarlet intertwining, evenly matched, loath to part.

Chu Wanning’s gaze was full of praise, but Mo Ran, gasping for breath and utterly exhausted from the fight, didn’t notice at all.

“Tianwen, return,” said Chu Wanning.

The golden willow vine that had mere moments ago been fierce and unrelenting became instantly pliant, like black ice melting into spring water. It glimmered as it obediently returned to Chu Wanning’s palm.

Mo Ran’s chest heaved as he panted for breath, Jiangui crackling with firelight in his grip. After a while, his legs gave out and he fell on his butt right there on the snowy ground, grievance written all over his face. “No more, no more. Shizun, you’re bullying me.”

“I let you have ten moves,” said Chu Wanning.

“How could ten moves possibly be enough?” Mo Ran whined petulantly. “A hundred would’ve been more like it! Owwie, my hand, my

arms—they're gonna fall off. Shi Mei! Shi Mei, gimme some rubs."

He continued blabbering as Xue Meng laughed and mocked him, and Shi Mei tried his best to calm them both down.

Chu Wanning glanced at them quietly and said no more.

In the green waters of the freezing lake, the corners of Chu Wanning's lips seemed to move slightly, as if in a faint yet warm smile—but there was no way to be sure and it was only for an instant. In the next moment, he had already turned around, hand held casually behind his back as he gazed at the enormous tree at the center of the courtyard with its thousands of drooping branches, his thoughts unfathomable.

That night, Mo Ran sat in a guest room with a soft, clean floor of white sand, its walls painted in aquamarine and enchanted to gleam softly with the rays of light that pierced the water. The window was half-open, a pearl curtain drifted gently in the evening breeze, and on the table was a lamp made of night-glow pearl that lit the room with a tranquil ambience.

In the center of the room sat a large seashell lined with layers of fine, soft satin. Mo Ran sank into the bed and once again called out Jiangui. He held it in his hand and stared at it. Perhaps he really was exhausted, as before long, after examining it for only a little while, he fell asleep.

Laying on Mo Ran's chest, Jiangui pulsed with a dim red light, as if following its master into slumber.

Mo Ran didn't know how long he'd slept, but when he awoke, the first thing he felt was an icy chill, followed by a burst of searing pain from his wrist.

He sucked in a breath and, holding his head, slowly sat up. The strange pain at his wrist grew more distinct as his consciousness returned. He was startled to discover that a gash had been cut into his wrist and had scabbed over with congealed blood.

What was going on? Where was he?!

Mo Ran's eyes shot open.

When he sobered up, he found himself in a dark and completely unfamiliar stone room with only a small opening in the ceiling for ventilation.

The cold light of the lake came through that opening to illuminate a narrow cell barely a few feet wide. The damp stone walls were a slimy ash-green, and they glistened faintly in the feeble glow.

Chapter 41:
This Venerable One Kisses the Wrong Person Again…

THERE WAS NOTHING REMARKABLE about the stone room. It was just plain walls on three sides and on the fourth, bars that coursed with magical red light. The only fixture in the cell was a crude bed covered with straw and made of stone.

There was nothing for Mo Ran to do but to lie on the stone bed. His hands and feet were both shackled, and the chains clanked with his every movement. Even worse, something seemed to be suppressing his spiritual powers, thereby preventing him from invoking them. As his mind raced with anxious thoughts, a creak caught his attention. He turned to see two merfolk enter.

"You!" Mo Ran growled angrily. "You lunatics! What exactly is going on? What do you think you're doing? Where are my fellow disciples? Where's Gouchen?! Oi! I'm talking to you!"

But no matter how Mo Ran yelled or cursed, the merfolk paid him no heed. They were carrying something wrapped in a length of red fox fur—a human-shaped something, which they expressionlessly set down on the stone bed.

Mo Ran snarled. "You little eels—"

"Quit yapping already," one of them finally said, their voice filled with contempt. "You're a spiritual essence of wood; this won't be such a bad deal for you."

The other also sneered. "More like a pretty sweet deal."

Mo Ran was so enraged, he was about to spit blood. "Just what do you want?! What did you lock me in here for? And what's that on the bed?!"

"What's that on the bed?" one replied mockingly.

"The person you like, of course," the other said.

Mo Ran's fingertips went cold with shock. "Shi Mei?"

The merfolk neither confirmed nor denied this. They only continued to

sneer. “The spring of youth is such a fleeting thing. Since the two of you are meant to be, we’ll let you have this night together. When it’s all over and done with, then you’ll find out why the Exalted God went to such trouble.”

After flinging out these words, they left.

The room was deathly silent. With his hands and feet restrained, Mo Ran couldn’t move at all. One minute blurred into the next, and he had no way to tell how much time had passed. He struggled until his wrists and ankles were raw and bloody, but to no avail.

Panting softly, Mo Ran turned to look at the person next to him, wrapped firmly in fox fur from head to toe. All he could see of them was a long strand of ink-black hair. He stared at that strand of hair, heart beating erratically with both panic and arousal.

He didn’t know why that creep Gouchen was doing this, but if this was what would let him realize his covetous desires for Shi Mei…

His thoughts ground to a halt, as if any more would profane that beautiful person.

Mo Ran stared at the ceiling, breaths heavy and stifled as if there was a weight on his chest. He’d longed for this for so long, but now that the chance had come, all he felt was unease. That initial filthy excitement slowly faded as a thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He gradually calmed down.

Whatever Gouchen was planning, it couldn’t be good. It’d be one thing if only Mo Ran himself was targeted, but how could he bear to let Shi Mei be dragged into it too?

Besides, this whole situation was someone else’s design; Shi Mei hadn’t agreed to anything at all. Mo Ran might have been scum, but he wanted to protect the person he liked, not hurt them. He resolved to himself that no matter what Gouchen did, he definitely wouldn’t take advantage of Shi Mei when he woke up.

A long while passed in silence before the person beside him finally moved.

Mo Ran hurriedly turned his head their way, voice raspy. “Shi—”

The “Mei” hadn’t come out before it made a stiff U-turn on the tip of his tongue and went right back in. Mo Ran swallowed, the jut of his throat

bobbing before he finally managed to spit out the second half.

"—zun?"

Shizun?!

Little Mo-xianjun's gaze, resolute and filled with chivalrous conviction only just a moment ago, faltered as soon as he saw the face peeking out from underneath the fox fur. In an instant, all his mental fortitude fell apart. The barricades in his chest that he had worked so hard to raise were razed to the ground in a barrage of cracking that turned them all to rubble.

All those thoughts about protecting that person, not taking advantage of him, not defiling him under any circumstances—each one was like a slap in the face, each one louder than the last.

Mo Ran's face turned pale. He could finally say with absolute certainty that every single inhabitant of this Jincheng Lake, even and especially that Gouchen, was blind as fuck!

To think that he liked Chu Wanning?

Ugh!

First that fox, now these merfolk—he seriously couldn't understand what made them all think that the apple of his eye was *Chu Wanning*. Could it be that they'd somehow figured out that he'd slept with Chu Wanning before and still wanted to sleep with him even now? Ridiculous! It wasn't like wanting to bed someone was the same as *liking* them!

For all that little Mo-xianjun was raving on the inside, filled with self-righteous indignation, in reality, he couldn't choke out even half a word. He could only stare dumbly as that pair of phoenix eyes slowly opened.

Ah, balls.

Mo Ran could almost hear the clunk of something in his head breaking.

A moment passed, and something seemed to ignite from the wreckage within his chest—along with a foul stench, black ashes, and a twisted kind of heat.

It was scalding hot. As if a fire-spitting dragon was suddenly soaring through the deathly stillness of this dark night, as if scorching lava and raging flames had burst out of the silent abyss. All of his premeditated reason and

self-control burned up in the roaring blaze.

This was the last thing he could have anticipated.

Chu Wanning's eyes, usually piercing, were hazy with sleep, languid and dazed, like a bamboo forest after rain, every leaf and sound laden with dew.

If that look was anything to go by, something seemed to be controlling his mind. He sat up slowly, the fox fur slipping off his shoulder and revealing a large expanse of supple skin. He was completely naked beneath the fur, but his back and shoulder were covered in bruises, love bites in hues of red and blue—

How…could this be?

Mo Ran felt like he was going crazy. Who had done this? Who had done this kind of thing to his…to his…his shizun? This was Chu Wanning, after all…

Every bone in Mo Ran's body trembled with rage, and his blood screamed with hatred.

This was Chu Wanning! Who had touched this person who belonged to him?! This person was *his*—

Mo Ran was so overcome with hatred that he didn't even stop to consider that in this life, Chu Wanning didn't belong to him at all—that he didn't belong to anyone. All he saw was Chu Wanning's firm, well-proportioned body, and those unfamiliar marks on that all too familiar skin.

"Shizun!"

Mo Ran's voice was low and twisted, but Chu Wanning didn't seem to hear his hoarse cry at all. He lowered his lashes and, like a puppet on a string, leaned over Mo Ran. One hand rose to caress Mo Ran's face as their eyes locked for a moment. Then Chu Wanning closed his eyes and leaned in, those dewy lips capturing Mo Ran's in a kiss.

Rarely had Chu Wanning ever kissed Mo Ran first; at the touch, all the fields of Mo Ran's heart dried up, and breathtaking, frantic colors exploded before his eyes as his pulse hammered wildly, feverishly.

Chu Wanning's body was cool to the touch, but all the same, where their lips and teeth met, heat flared. Despite his jealous agony over Chu

Wanning having been debased by another, Mo Ran couldn't resist being seduced by this familiar man. Pain and arousal mingled within him.

When they parted, Mo Ran was breathing hard. He opened his eyes only to see Chu Wanning, eyes glassy and skin flushed with desire. His blood raced, and he couldn't help but try to reach up and stroke Chu Wanning's face.

But he was still bound in chains and unable to move. Chu Wanning glanced at the shackles but said nothing. Instead, he rose to his knees and moved to straddle him. Mo Ran swallowed hard, throat moving—but then he noticed that with this movement, between Chu Wanning's long, shapely legs, an unmistakable stickiness slid slowly down his thighs…

Mo Ran saw red. His eyes snapped open and he tried to sit up with a jolt, but he was yanked back by the chains, which slammed him back down against the bed.

"Who…" He couldn't bear it anymore, and he roared like a caged beast, bereft of all reason. "Who the fuck did this to you?! I'll kill him! *I'll kill him!*"

He didn't care if it was Gouchen the Exalted or the Heavenly Emperor himself, whether it was a god or a demon or a ghost or even the fucking Buddha—he was Taxian-jun! Chu Wanning was *Taxian-jun's*! Even if he was currently trapped in this young body, he was still the Emperor of the Mortal Realm down to the very marrow of his bones! Who had dared touch his—forget his "shizun"—who had dared touch his *person*? His, Mo Weiyu's, Taxian-jun's person!

"Mo Ran!"

Someone seemed to be calling him.

But he was engulfed in the flames of rage, his senses muddled, hearing but not quite hearing.

"Mo Ran!"

He had to kill them all. *Unforgivable*. Where was Jiangui? Where had his spiritual powers gone? Why couldn't he summon Jiangui?! He was about to absolutely lose it.

An insufferable humiliation, a despicable transgression—an

insufferable humiliation, a despicable transgression!

Who had dared to touch Chu Wanning? In his previous life, he'd dug out the eyes of anyone who presumed to so much as *glance* at Yuheng of the Night Sky one too many times. He'd even made them swallow their own eyeballs after gouging them out! And then, at night, he would hold Chu Wanning under himself and fuck him unto exhaustion. But in this life—

"Mo Weiyu!"

Just who was calling to him so persistently? That voice really was familiar. It was as if he had heard it somewhere before…

No, that wasn't it. It was as if he had heard it *constantly* before, everywhere, as if the owner of that voice had kept him company through so many years…

"Mo Weiyu, wake up! Have you lost your mind? What are you *doing*?!"

Mo Ran's eyes flew open. When he turned toward the source of the voice outside his cell, he saw pristine robes as white as snow, a pair of sharp eyes written with worry, and eyebrows tensely drawn together with an aura of killing intent. It was none other than Chu Wanning.

"Shizun?!" Mo Ran paled.

Then on the bed—

He whipped his head around and was nearly scared to death by the face mere inches from his own. This wasn't Chu Wanning at all! It was clearly a monster with a human body and a fox's face—a dead one!

And "dead" was neither an exaggeration nor hyperbole. It was literally dead.

The thing pressed against him, that had just been passionately making out with him mere moments ago, really was a corpse. The fox monster's eyes were empty, and its skin was pallid with not a hint of life.

Mo Ran almost retched thinking about how, while entranced by some illusion, he had just been kissing that thing. His face turned an interesting color and he cried out, "What's happening?!"

Outside the cell, Chu Wanning held a cursed talisman between two

fingers. Seeing as the fox monster was no longer moving, Mo Ran guessed that Chu Wanning had probably used a spell to rip the talisman off of the fox corpse in the nick of time.

With a burst of spiritual energy, a stream of dark red blood bubbled forth from the talisman accompanied by bloodcurdling shrieks as the paper burned to ashes.

Chu Wanning opened his hand, and the scorched ashes slowly gathered in his palm to re-form as a jet-black chess piece.[23] He stared at that chess piece, expression troubled.

"It really is the Zhenlong Chess Formation…" Chu Wanning muttered, before looking up and pinning Mo Ran with his gaze. "What food does Shi Mingjing usually make for you when you're sick? Tell me!"

"Huh? Uh…" Too much had happened in too short a span of time; Mo Ran's mind was in complete disarray. He could only say dumbly, "Wh-what are you asking about that for?"

"Just tell me!" Chu Wanning said harshly.

"Wontons?"

Only then did Chu Wanning's face relax, just slightly, though his brow was still furrowed. "Mo Ran, listen closely: That Gouchen is an imposter and is not the actual God of Weaponry. This person is adept at illusions and knows the Zhenlong Chess Formation, one of the three forbidden techniques. That's why I had to be careful, in case you were one of his illusions too."

Mo Ran was about to cry from indignation. "Why would I be tied up if I was an illusion?!"

Chu Wanning paused. "I'll get you out of there right away."

Mo Ran nodded frantically. "Oh yeah," he said, "Shizun, what about Shi Mei and Xue Meng?"

"Much like you, they also succumbed to the drugs in the wine and were locked up elsewhere." Seeing Mo Ran's expression, Chu Wanning added, "No need to worry; they're fine now. It's just that there was no way to tell what kind of dangers lay in wait in this prison, so I left them outside. You'll be able to see them once we get out of here."

As for the Zhenlong Chess Formation, Chu Wanning didn't explain

further, nor did he need to. It was one of the three forbidden techniques of the cultivation world, which were as notorious as they were powerful.

As the name implied, the Zhenlong Chess Formation was a technique that used other beings as game pieces. The user maneuvered them at will like pieces in a game of chess. That user typically didn't appear in person on the field, but rather laid down a chessboard and manipulated their pawns from the shadows. In this way, they forced everything from living people to the ghosts of the departed, from beasts on land to birds in the skies, to serve at their beck and call. A living creature under the control of the Zhenlong Chess Formation was loyal to the user until death, and a dead creature would do their bidding until torn limb from limb.

However, the scope of the user's control depended on their spiritual strength. Newly deceased people and beasts were the easiest to manipulate, followed by those long dead, then live beasts. Finally, if the user had cultivated to the highest level, the technique allowed them to control living people.

Very few people in the world were capable of executing this highest tier of the Zhenlong Chess Formation, but by the time Mo Ran had named himself emperor, he'd perfected the technique. That year, when he faced off against Chu Wanning in a death match, he'd laid down a scroll a hundred feet long, a chessboard of splashed ink, and an army of strewn pieces.

In that battle, hundreds upon thousands of chess pieces had touched down simultaneously; winged beasts had blotted out the golden sun and dragons had burst out of the raging seas. Mo Ran had summoned endless beasts of both land and sky and commanded an army of countless living people. A scene like that was a rare sight even in hell.

This fox corpse was obviously something that had been controlled by the Zhenlong Chess Formation, supplemented by an additional layer of illusion magic.

Rumor had it that the fur of the Qingqiu fox clan's earliest ancestor had been divided into forty-nine pieces of varying sizes and made into magical artifacts. If one were to take someone's blood and drip it on the fox fur, then wrap that fur around something—anything at all, even a block of rotten wood—that thing would take on the appearance of that person's heart's desire.

The fur wrapped around this fox corpse was one such artifact.

However, the magic only worked on the original owner of the blood; to anyone else, it would look as it always had.

It was a simple task to free Mo Ran. By the time Chu Wanning got him out of the cell, he had also more or less finished explaining everything to him.

What Mo Ran couldn't figure out was this: "Shizun, how did you know that Gouchen was a fake?"

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Chapter 42:
This Venerable One Is a Little Uneasy

CHU WANNING REPLIED, "If it was the real Gouchen the Exalted, why would he use the dead instead of the living? Even though this fellow's powers are fairly strong, they're nothing compared to a god's."

This made a lot of sense, but Mo Ran was still confused about a few items. "Was it when Shizun saw this…this dead fox that you realized that guy was an imposter?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "No."

"Then how could you tell?"

"Do you remember what this Gouchen asked me when he first showed up?" Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran thought about it for a moment. "I think he asked you something about your weapon?"

"That's right," Chu Wanning confirmed. "I've never hidden the aura of the holy weapons on my person; they can be sensed with just a little perceptiveness. But even as the supposed God of a Thousand Weapons, he couldn't immediately tell that I had two holy weapons from Jincheng Lake and assumed I only had one. I was suspicious then, but the important thing was to acquire your weapons, so there wasn't a good time to bring it up. I just kept a close eye on everything he did from then on so that he wouldn't get his way."

"But…" Mo Ran said. "If he isn't Gouchen the Exalted, how could he create holy weapons?"

"First off, it's just a rumor that Gouchen created all those weapons. No one really knows why this lake has so many weapons inside of it, so the holy weapons weren't necessarily made by Gouchen in the first place. Second, this person let you all pick whatever you wanted from the holy arsenal, but who knows if they were even his to give to begin with? Moreover, I examined Xue Meng and Shi Mei's weapons earlier: they're entirely fake."

At this, Mo Ran grew alarmed. “Fake?”

“Mn.”

It took Mo Ran a long moment of staring blankly before he realized something. “Then Jiangui…?”

“Jiangui is real,” said Chu Wanning. “But his goal wasn’t just to grant you a weapon.”

“Then what did he want to do?” Mo Ran gave the fox corpse lying on the stone bed a disgusted look. “First he spent all this effort to lock us up, and then he made this sickening thing. What does he even want?”

“You,” said Chu Wanning.

“Huh?”

“What you just said was only half-right. That Gouchen didn’t go through all this to trap *us*; the one he ultimately wants is you.”

“What does he want with me?” Mo Ran laughed dryly. “I’m just some dumbass.”

“I’ve never met a dumbass who could cultivate a core within one year,” Chu Wanning replied.

Mo Ran had been about to continue, but a realization hit him and he froze. Had Chu Wanning just…praised him?

The thought made his heart rate pick up, and he stared at Chu Wanning with wide eyes. A few moments passed before he slowly blinked; the thick face he’d always been so proud of actually blushed, just a little.

Chu Wanning, however, was paying him no attention and went on muttering to himself. “Furthermore, Tianwen and Jiangui seem to have something to do with that willow tree in the courtyard. I’d read about it before, in ancient texts. When Gouchen the Exalted descended to the mortal realm, he brought with him three willow branches from the imperial court. But the ancient texts were missing a great deal; I never did find out what Gouchen did with those three lengths of heavenly willow.”

He paused before continuing. “But if the rumors are true, it seems that Tianwen, Jiangui, and the old tree in the courtyard could be those same three willow branches. Two became holy weapons, and one was taken to the

bottom of Jincheng Lake to become the powerful guardian of Gouchen's arsenal."

"But what does that have to do with me?" Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning shook his head. "How could it not have something to do with you? You're the one who awakened Jiangui."

Mo Ran sighed. "Like I said: Seriously, what the hell?!"

"My guess is that this impostor's ulterior motive has something to do with the willow tree in the courtyard. But that's as much as I can infer from what we've gathered. For now, I don't know anything else beyond that."

This was almost all conjecture on Chu Wanning's part, but Mo Ran felt that given Chu Wanning's intelligence, if this was his conclusion, then it was probably pretty close to the truth.

As they considered these things, they walked quickly though the gloomy underwater dungeon path. When they made it past that twisting, winding path, they walked another until they finally came to the exit. Taking advantage of the fact that the merfolk patrolling back and forth weren't expecting them, they escaped.

The dark underground cells exited right into the courtyard where the giant willow stood. They surfaced to a scene that left Mo Ran shocked.

Four coffins had been placed in front of the giant willow, and one of them was empty. Lying in the other three were Chu Wanning, Shi Mei, and Xue Meng.

Mo Ran paled. "What the hell is this?!"

"Those are corpse-sacrificing coffins," Chu Wanning said. "You see the vine wrapped around the edge of the caskets? The other end is linked to the giant willow. The fake Gouchen only needs you, so after he drugged us, he had merfolk take you to the cell and put the three of us into these coffins. He can transfer an entire lifetime's worth of cultivation from the people within those coffins to the giant willow. It's similar to extracting blood."

Chu Wanning acknowledged Mo Ran's grim look as he continued. "Don't worry, Shi Mei and Xue Meng are unharmed. I pretended to be unconscious and waited for an opportunity to dispatch the three merfolk guarding the coffins. The three people you see in front of you are in fact the

bodies of those demons."

He said all of this very matter-of-factly, but Mo Ran couldn't help raising his eyebrows and covertly sneaking a look at him.

How high was the cultivation of the merfolk in Jincheng Lake? Chu Wanning's so-called simple plan to "wait for an opportunity to dispatch them" meant that he'd had to take care of all three merfolk in a single blow, and without making a sound.

Just how skilled *was* this man?

It had been too many years since he'd last fought on equal footing with Chu Wanning, so hearing this left him a little dazed. A scene from his past life flashed before his eyes—that striking, unforgettable figure standing within the hailstorm, face turned slightly toward him, eyes shining bright like Mercury in the heavens.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning asked, seeing him lost in thought.

Mo Ran jolted back to the present. "Nothing."

Silence.

"I was just wondering how Shizun made the merfolk take those forms."

Chu Wanning smiled grimly. "Simple illusions. If that fake Gouchen can do it, how could I be any less able? We'll leave the fake bodies here to avoid being discovered by those eels. Give him a taste of his own medicine."

Mo Ran had no words.

In any case, they were in a dangerous place, so they couldn't stay long. They took a short breather and left right away. However, when they ran to the meeting place that Chu Wanning had agreed upon with Xue Meng and Shi Mei, they found it empty. No one was there.

Mo Ran's face went completely white. "Where's Shi Mei?!"

Chu Wanning's expression was also slightly uneasy. He didn't answer and instead lifted his ring finger, producing a golden light at its tip. He could track the location of the haitang flowers he'd tucked into the waistbands of his three disciples before they climbed Dawning Peak.

After a short period of time, Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and put the light away. "Something we didn't expect may have occurred. The two

of them probably ran from here to hide from the merfolk patrolling back and forth, possibly toward the market. Come, let's go look."

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were both extremely skilled and easily avoided the merfolk patrols. They swiftly flipped over the tall walls of the courtyard and rushed in the direction of the market that Gouchen had taken them to earlier that day.

Normally, there was no such thing as night and day under water, but Jincheng Lake was different. Within it, one could perceive the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon. By this time, the long night had broken, and the sun was rising in the east.

Mo Ran could make out Jincheng Lake's morning market setting up in the distance, and the bustling city center was filled with gathering people. He subconsciously let out the breath he'd been holding. It looked like Shi Mei and Xue Meng were safe; otherwise, the scene before them wouldn't have been so peaceful.

On the other hand, for some reason, Chu Wanning's face didn't look so good. He didn't say anything as he wordlessly pulled Mo Ran toward him.

"Shizun?"

"Come here."

"What's wrong?"

"Stay close." Chu Wanning's voice seemed to be laced with some self-reproach, even if he looked as cold as always. "Xue Meng and Shi Mei have already gotten lost. I'm afraid that if I'm not careful, you'll also…"

Mo Ran realized that Chu Wanning's face was a little pale, and it actually seemed to be out of worry for him. At first, he stared blankly. Then, for reasons he couldn't figure out, his heart jolted faintly, and he offered some words of comfort. "I won't get lost. Come on, Shizun. Let's go look for them."

He started walking forward while he spoke, and as he did so, he turned his wrist and casually took Chu Wanning's hand in his own.

Chu Wanning did not reply, but in Mo Ran's palm, his fingertips seemed to tremble for the barest fraction of a moment.

But the moment was too short and too faint. Mo Ran's heart was

preoccupied with Shi Mei, and so he didn't think much of the sensation. He chalked it up to his own mistaken perception.

"Fish-blood mantou, freshly made!"

"Skin of Shuairan Snake, premium clothing material, only three feet left! Once it's all gone, you'll have to wait for my next shedding!"

"Selling squid ink brow-filler, made with fresh ink, spat just this morning by yours truly. It'll do wonders for your eyebrows—hey! Hey wait, miss, don't leave!"

The shouts of the peddlers in the market fell incessantly on their ears. The extraordinary scene was far too much for anyone to take in.

Mo Ran pulled Chu Wanning along with a silly smile on his face for two steps before realizing that something wasn't right. He slammed to a halt, eyes widening in an instant, and all the blood in his body ran cold.

Something was wrong. Something was *very* wrong here.

He swept his gaze around, and sure enough…

A headless ghost sat by its stall, selling combs and makeup. It held a comb between two fingers with long, scarlet-painted nails as it brushed the hair on its own still-bleeding head, which rested on its knees. "High-quality bone combs," it called in a soft voice. "Take one home with you today."

Just as he'd thought! *Exactly* just as he'd thought!

In this city center, every person's movement, every person's words, every person's expression, was exactly the same as when Gouchen had brought them through the day before.

Mo Ran jerkily recoiled a few steps, crashing right into Chu Wanning, who caught him. He jerked up his head and said hoarsely, "Shizun, what is this?"

Chu Wanning seemed to have had his own suspicions for a while now, but after confirming the situation with his own eyes, his heart dropped in his chest. He gripped Mo Ran tightly.

"What's going on? What is this? An illusion?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. After thinking it over, he said, "Mo Ran, it must've occurred to you before. Jincheng Lake has many different beasts

and creatures, and at least some among them must have seen the real Gouchen the Exalted before. In that case, how would they not be able to tell that this one was a fake?"

The color drained from Mo Ran's face, and a twinge of fear ran through him. "Yeah…you're right."

"And let me ask," Chu Wanning continued, "if you were pretending to be Gouchen the Exalted and hiding in Jincheng Lake, how would you make everyone else say what you wanted them to say, do what you wanted them to do, listening to your every word and putting on an act for you?"

Mo Ran understood immediately.

The Zhenlong Chess Formation. Black and white chess pieces would fall into place as everything under the heavens fell into line. None knew the sheer might of this forbidden technique better than Mo Ran.

He almost blurted this out, but he glimpsed Chu Wanning's eyes and managed to stop himself just in time. How could his sixteen-year-old self so easily name one of the three forbidden techniques?

And so, all he said was, "That would be very difficult."

"No," Chu Wanning said. "It's very easy." He paused for a second. "You just need them all to be dead."

Chapter 43:
This Venerable One Is a Sacrificial Offering?!

MO RAN DIDN'T EVEN get a chance to respond before an ear-piercingly shrill voice rang out behind him.

"Make way, make way! Let me through!"

It was the fuban.

Lugging that heavy pile of rocks, the fuban trudged to the same apothecary as before, where it yelled, "I can't take it anymore! Hurry and save me, Doctor!"

A white-haired merman swam out, but his tail was distinct from those of the other merfolk Mo Ran had seen. The entire length glittered lustrously, like flowing gold. His hair was held back with simple clips and draped over his shoulders, and his face, although wrinkled, was well-proportioned, with a straight nose and pleasantly curved lips. His golden eyes were as tranquil as a misty drizzle, and it was easy to imagine how handsome he must have been in his prime.

Mo Ran's blood ran cold. *This* was different. Where had that turquoise sea dragon gone?

The elderly merman glanced at them from afar but said nothing. Instead, he made his way to the doorstep and bent over to remove the rocks from the fuban's back, one by one.

With the removal of the last rock, the illusion shattered. The fuban exploded, its blood diffusing into the water like the haze of fog. Near simultaneously, all the monsters and creatures in the market stiffened for a split second—before drooping bonelessly as their bodies festered, saturating the lake's water with a miasma of blood.

The lake was dyed a red that rapidly deepened as more and more blood seeped into the water. First, things in the distance became hard to see, but soon, the immediate area was clouded over as well, and finally, scarlet filled their vision to the point that they could no longer even see their hands in front of their faces.

“Mo Ran,” said Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning all too well and needed no further explanation. “Shizun, I’m here. Don’t worry.”

Chu Wanning was a man of few words, or rather, he was no good with words. For a moment, he was silent before simply saying, “Be careful.”

Through the bloody, muddled water, Mo Ran couldn’t see Chu Wanning’s face. That face probably wouldn’t have changed color even if the sky fell, but he could clearly detect the concern in his shizun’s voice. He rarely ever sensed this kind of warmth from Chu Wanning in everyday circumstances, and a sudden warmth suffused his own chest. He gripped Chu Wanning’s hand even tighter. “Okay.”

Standing close, back-to-back, despite not being able to see each other, each man could feel the other’s heartbeat and breathing. The situation was perilous, so Chu Wanning summoned Tianwen, and Mo Ran followed suit with Jiangui, having recovered his spiritual strength.

After they called out their holy weapons, Mo Ran exclaimed, “Shizun, look over there!”

Chu Wanning turned toward the apothecary, where the elderly merman had just been cleaning up the rock pile. There he saw that a couple dozen white spots of light of varying sizes had appeared on the ground. Hand in hand, he and Mo Ran walked over, and sure enough, the spots of light were the fuban’s rocks.

The elderly merman had arranged the several dozen rocks into three neat rows, and every piece glowed with a gentle radiance. Slowly, a figure appeared before the rocks. It seemed to be the same white-haired merman from earlier.

“Who are you?” Mo Ran asked.

The merman didn’t answer. He only glanced at Chu Wanning, then Mo Ran, before wordlessly lifting his hand and pointing at the rocks on the ground.

“You want us to pick up the rocks?” Mo Ran asked.

The white-haired merman nodded, then extended a single finger.

“Do you mean…pick only one?”

The white-haired merman nodded, then shook his head. He pointed at Mo Ran, then Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran figured it out. “We should each pick one?”

This time the white-haired merman nodded vigorously before standing still and staring fixedly at them.

“Shizun, should we do as he said?” Mo Ran asked.

“Might as well. We don’t have any other ideas.”

So, they each picked a rock. Unexpectedly, as soon as the tips of their fingers touched their rocks, a multitude of distorted colors flashed before their eyes as the world spun at full tilt. When things settled back down, the endless red had disappeared.

On closer inspection, they realized they had been teleported back to the arsenal of holy weapons.

“Shizun!”

“Shizun, A-Ran!”

Xue Meng and Shi Mei were there too. Shocked and overjoyed to see Chu Wanning, they rushed over to greet them. Chu Wanning hadn’t expected the glowing rocks to be enchanted with a teleportation spell, and he was a little nauseous from the rapid spinning. He put one hand to his forehead while the other remained tightly clutched around Mo Ran’s fingers.

The entire time they had been within the bloody lake, their hands had been joined without ever parting.

Chu Wanning’s status being what it was, he rarely had the opportunity to hold hands with Mo Ran. Most of the time, he could only stand a little ways off to watch the intimacy between his disciples from a distance. Thus, he cautiously cherished this rare warmth in his palm…

“Shi Mei!”

But this warmth, which was such a precious treasure to him, was to the man holding his hand perhaps as worthless as a pair of worn-out shoes—something that might not be worth mentioning, or perhaps not even worth noticing at all.

The moment Mo Ran saw Shi Mei, he automatically let go of Chu

Wanning.

Chu Wanning's fingertips twitched slightly, and, for a split second, it seemed as if they wanted to grab back on to Mo Ran. But what excuse would he have for that?

He no longer had the courage to like someone. He didn't want to lose the pathetic bit of pride he yet retained.

Chu Wanning watched Mo Ran smiling so easily at Shi Mei, hugging him so casually and stroking his hair so gently.

Chu Wanning's fingertips drooped back down with a touch of embarrassment and a touch of awkwardness. Luckily, his face was habitually impassive, so his emotions didn't show through too clearly.

Maybe it was because he was getting older—and that he was a stiff person to begin with—but after that spin in the teleportation array, his chest felt a little cold. But it wasn't too bad. There was still a bit of warmth left at the tips of his fingers.

Leaning on that thread of remaining warmth, which would soon disappear, he slowly stood straight and arranged his gaze and features until they were tidy and proper.

"Shizun, are you feeling okay? Your face is so pale…"

Chu Wanning nodded at Xue Meng. "I'm fine." He paused for a moment, then asked, "Were you two also teleported here by that merman?"

Before Xue Meng had a chance to respond, there came a burst of burbling sounds. Chu Wanning turned to see something emerge from the boiling hot crucible pool with a splash: a badly mutilated face, followed by the rest of an equally disfigured person.

This person definitely couldn't be mortal, or at least definitely not a living being, for no mortal could survive being submerged in fiery molten metal. But though raw and burned all over, he still clearly drew breath. Chains shackled his four limbs and bound him within the crucible to suffer.

He slowly opened his eyes and bowed over and over to the group, his gaze a plea for them to approach the crucible.

Although he couldn't speak, he did have other means of expressing himself. They watched as he waved his arms, bloody flesh barely clinging to

his bones, and a small wave surged forth from the metal in the crucible to form several rows of ancient script in the air.

"What kind of writing is this?" Xue Meng asked, startled. "Why can't I read a single character?"

"It's ancient Cangjie[24] script," Chu Wanning replied. "Something I've yet to teach you."

"Then what does it say?" Mo Ran asked.

Chu Wanning walked up and carefully studied the writing. "He is… asking for help."

According to legend, ancient Cangjie script was the writing of the heavenly realm. It was practically a lost art in the mortal realm; very few people knew it anymore, and even an accomplished zongshi like Chu Wanning wasn't fluent, though he could at least get the gist.

Chu Wanning studied the writing for a bit, slowly interpreting. "He says that he is the spirit of this willow tree, and he's called the Heart-Pluck Willow. When he was a sapling, Gouchen the Exalted brought him here from the seventh heaven of the realm of the gods. Afterward, Gouchen abandoned this world for reasons unknown. The Heart-Pluck Willow hasn't seen him since and doesn't even know if he yet lives.

"But even without Gouchen's presence, the Heart-Pluck Willow has continued to follow his instructions over these hundreds of millennia, protecting Jincheng Lake and guarding the arsenal of holy weapons. Nourished by the spiritual energy here, the tree gradually cultivated a human form. The years passed without incident until one day, when a—"

Chu Wanning stopped reading.

"What's the matter?" asked Mo Ran.

"I don't recognize these three characters. Seems to be a name." Chu Wanning raised a hand to point at the complex, twisting characters, "Anyway, this person came to Jincheng Lake. He was powerful and cruel, and he slaughtered everything in the lake, then used the Zhenlong Chess Formation to control their remains. The Heart-Pluck Willow was no exception."

"That person is probably the fake Gouchen!" Mo Ran said

immediately.

Upon hearing his words, the Heart-Pluck Willow's eyes flickered, and he nodded twice in agreement.

"Huh, I really guessed it." Mo Ran grinned, a little embarrassed, and scratched his head. "Ha ha, I'm pretty smart, eh?"

Chu Wanning gave him a mild look before continuing. "In the years since, the Heart-Pluck Willow has been in a continually unconscious state, without even half a day of clarity. Fortunately, the other two willow branches that were once connected with him in body and spirit—Tianwen and Jiangui—both awakened. Borrowing their strength, Zhaixin Liu was temporarily able to regain consciousness. If not for that, he probably would've already lost control and hurt everyone here."

When "everyone here" heard that, they were either incredulous or apprehensive. The three youths collectively raised their heads to stare at the being in the crucible, unsure of how to take its self-introduction.

"Willow-qianbei—" Mo Ran started.

"Willow-qianbei?" Xue Meng interrupted.

"Well, what else am I supposed to call him? Pluck-qianbei?" Mo Ran glared at Xue Meng before continuing. "I'm gonna say something you probably won't like, but there seem to be some holes in your story."

Though the Heart-Pluck Willow could not speak, he could understand spoken words. He turned to face Mo Ran.

"You initially said you were under the fake Gouchen's control," said Mo Ran, "but then you said you regained your consciousness under the influence of Tianwen and Jiangui's awakening. But the fake Gouchen was the one who gave me Jiangui. How could he not have known the consequences of doing that?"

The Heart-Pluck Willow shook his head, and the characters in front of Chu Wanning changed.

"I am of the realm of the gods," Chu Wanning read for him. "He knows little about me and is unaware that the holy weapons can affect my consciousness. In his pursuit of the three forbidden techniques, he needs to draw upon my power, but my lifespan is coming to its end, and he has been

frantically looking for a way to extend my life. However, I sincerely do not wish to continue living; death would be far preferable to helping this villain. It's only that I am under his control and cannot act of my own free will…"

Chu Wanning paused to think aloud. "That must be why the fake Gouchen brought Mo Ran here. Mo Ran is a spiritual essence of wood, so the fake must be planning to combine his spiritual power with that of Jiangui, which he'll offer as a sacrifice to you."

The Heart-Pluck Willow nodded.

Mo Ran still didn't quite understand. "But that fake Gouchen said himself that there are *two* spiritual essences of wood. Shizun is one as well; why did he only lock up *me*?"

The Heart-Pluck Willow wrote, "The younger the sacrificial offering, the better. When it comes to making an offering to a tree spirit, even more care must be taken. Moreover, the offering must be sated in their appetites and desires, their every need satisfied, and their life must be taken as they are immersed in a euphoric illusion that satiates these needs—they cannot be even slightly aware. Otherwise, the offering would have lingering regrets, and the resulting resentful energy would accelerate my withering."

Upon hearing this, Mo Ran's thoughts snapped back to the fox spirit monster in his cell, the one that had taken on Chu Wanning's appearance.

So that had been to sate his desires, like fattening up a pig before the slaughter to make it tastier. That also explained why he had seen Chu Wanning instead of Shi Mei. He cherished Shi Mei far too much to defile him. When it came to questions of desire, he did indeed lust after Chu Wanning far more than he did Shi Mei…

The strange look on Mo Ran's face made Chu Wanning assume he was still uneasy. Wanting to reassure him, he asked, "What are you thinking about?"

Mo Ran's face turned red. "N-nothing."

Chu Wanning stared at him blankly for a second before comprehension dawned. He instantly closed his mouth. A while passed before he turned away in a fit of embarrassed rage.

"Uneasy"? This jerk had definitely just been thinking about those so-

called “desires”—daydreaming, even!

Chu Wanning shook out his sleeves in indignant fury and, expression icy, muttered, “Shameless.”

Mo Ran had nothing to say in his own defense. Good thing Chu Wanning didn’t know just who had been satisfying his desires in that illusion, or he’d probably skin Mo Ran alive in a fit of anger.

While he was in the midst of this musing, the floor of the arsenal of holy weapons suddenly started to shake.

Xue Meng let out a startled yell. “What’s happening?!”

Chapter 44:
This Venerable One Doesn't Want to Owe You

THE HEART-PLUCK WILLOW didn't get a chance to respond before his face twisted and he clutched his head in pain, his mouth open in a soundless scream. Even though he could make no sound, that horrifying expression and those bulging eyes made his agonized shrieks practically audible.

Help me. Help me—!

His lips contorted, mouth stretching impossibly wide, and bloody veins spread quickly across his sclera. If not for the chains shackling him in place, he likely would have vaulted up and violently ended his own life.

"I beg of you… Hurry…and destroy me…"

It seemed that the Heart-Pluck Willow's grasp on his consciousness was nearing its limit. He struggled in agony, but to no avail. A black fog surged out of the crucible and crashed into the body trapped inside in an outright attack. The chains rattled sharply as sparks flew.

This rapid turn of events drove Chu Wanning to move quickly. His long sleeves swept as he shielded the disciples behind him. "How can I save you?"

The Heart-Pluck Willow moved slowly, but he could still control the molten metal in the pool. More rows of ancient Cangjie script formed in the air.

"I am about to lose consciousness and attack you. It is not my intention to hurt you, but I will no longer be able to control myself. There is no time to explain; the only thing I can do for you now is apprise you of the techniques at my disposal. Pray take care…"

The metal re-formed.

"I am well-versed in three techniques.

"First, Dream of Nanke:[25] a nightmare technique that puts those afflicted to sleep and grants them all they desire in a wondrous dream. As such, even those with spiritual powers strong enough to perceive it as an

illusion might willingly remain therein, never to wake.

"Second, Temptation of the Heart: a technique that uses that which a person most covets as enticement, then induces the afflicted to slaughter one another.

"Third, Heart Pluck…"

But at that very moment, the Heart-Pluck Willow's spiritual energy ran out, and he could no longer control the metal to form more words. And, just like that, the effects of the Heart Pluck technique were left unknown.

A bloody mist exploded from the struggling Heart-Pluck Willow. As he lost command of the crucible's contents, he dragged his finger through his spilled blood, and his bulging, spasming eyeballs fixed on Chu Wanning. He yet refused to yield.

"Shizun!" Xue Meng hurriedly grabbed Chu Wanning as he made to approach. "Don't go—it might be a trap!"

The Heart-Pluck Willow, unable to speak, could only hold up that finger he had dipped in blood. Abruptly, tears welled in his eyes.

"You want me to come over?" Chu Wanning asked.

The Heart-Pluck Willow nodded slowly.

Chu Wanning was quiet.

"Shizun!"

Xue Meng tried to stop him once again, but Chu Wanning only shook his head before approaching the crucible by himself and extending a hand.

The Heart-Pluck Willow seemed quite moved by this. He gazed deeply at Chu Wanning and struggled to wave his arms—skin and flesh still melting off them—as if in gratitude. Then, pushing through the searing agony, he grabbed Chu Wanning's hand and wrote shakily on his palm:

Draw your lots, break the nightmare…

Do not…lose sight…of your…heart…

Once…the nightmare is broken…the trial…ends!

He hadn't yet finished writing the last word when he crumpled bonelessly, like a pile of mud, and fell back into the boiling crucible to

disappear from view.

Simultaneously, an enormous wave of scarlet rose from the pool with a resounding crash. The metal roared up from the ground to surge into the sky as nine pillars of flame, each shaped like a dragon. Chu Wanning was forced to retreat, though the fire reflected in his eyes.

Four tokens shot out from the fiery pillars to hang in midair.

"Are these the…tokens for drawing lots that the Heart-Pluck Willow mentioned?" Shi Mei asked at once, remembering the Heart-Pluck Willow's words.

He stepped closer, but Chu Wanning stopped him. "Don't touch them. All of you, get behind me."

"Shizun…" said Shi Mei.

"I'm here. It'll be okay," said Chu Wanning. "Don't take any chances. Let me go first."

He spoke mildly and without much intonation, but Mo Ran's heart quivered. For some reason, the Chu Wanning before his eyes suddenly overlapped with that heartless person from his previous lifetime—the one who had coldly watched his own disciple perish.

If he could say something like that, then why, in the past, had he stood by and done nothing as Shi Mei died?

Mo Ran found himself feeling like he had never understood Chu Wanning. Despite himself, he also muttered, "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning paid his disciples no heed as he lifted a hand and picked one of the tokens out of the air. The token was made of jade, light yellow in color. He looked it over front and back and quietly murmured to himself. "Hm?"

"What's wrong?" asked Xue Meng.

"There's nothing on it," said Chu Wanning.

"How could that be?" Xue Meng was puzzled. "Let me try."

They each picked one of the four tokens. Xue Meng and Shi Mei's jade tokens were the same as Chu Wanning's, bare of any words. But when Mo Ran flipped his token over, his eyes widened.

“Blass?”

The other three immediately looked at him.

Xue Meng frowned. “What’s a blass?”

Mo Ran jabbed a finger at his token. “That’s what it says.”

Xue Meng slid over to take a look and instantly let out an angry holler. “Pah! More like you just read the half that you could actually read!”

“It’s ‘blood hourglass,’” Chu Wanning said abruptly.

He could read the majority of ancient Cangjie script and didn’t make things up if he wasn’t sure. Therefore, if he said that was what was written on the token, then it was definitely written on the token.

Mo Ran stared blankly. “What does blood hourglass mean?”

Chu Wanning shook his head. “I don’t know.”

As if in answer, a low rumbling sound came from the arsenal’s towering ceiling, and from it descended a massive copper hourglass mottled with rust. Unlike other hourglasses, this one had a cross mounted to its front, though its purpose was unknown.

Chu Wanning glanced at the hourglass, then looked down at the token in Mo Ran’s hand. Blood hourglass. He suddenly understood what was meant by “draw your lots.”

Chu Wanning’s expression shifted abruptly as he shouted, voice sharp, “Mo Ran, throw the token away—quickly!”

The order left no room for argument; without knowing why, Mo Ran unthinkingly moved to obey.

He wouldn’t have known if he hadn’t tried, but now that he *was* trying, Mo Ran found that the jade token had somehow stuck firmly to his hand. He couldn’t fling it away.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and rushed forward to trade his own token for Mo Ran’s. But at that moment, dozens of thorny vines burst forth from the rusty hourglass above and headed straight for Mo Ran.

“Move!”

“Shizun!”

"Shizun!"

Blood splattered everywhere. At the very last second, Chu Wanning had shoved Mo Ran aside, and the thorny vines pierced through his body instead.

In his current younger form, Mo Ran had been no match for the force of Chu Wanning's shove. It was impossible not to hear the sound of tearing flesh as he stumbled backward and fell to the ground, followed by Xue Meng and Shi Mei's twisted screams, loud and shrill.

No way. How could this be? This was Chu Wanning—the Chu Wanning who had beaten Mo Ran, scolded him, who had never once looked on him kindly. The Chu Wanning who had callously watched his own disciple die right before his eyes. The Chu Wanning who had coldly said, "Vile by nature, beyond remedy." The Chu Wanning who…

Mo Ran raised his head.

Amidst the chaos, he saw the blood soaking through that same person's robes. Sharp, densely packed vines pierced from his back all the way through to his front, to the exact same place where he had been injured by the ghost mistress. That old wound, not yet healed, had once again been shredded into a bloody mess.

The Chu Wanning who had…who had protected Mo Ran with his own body in the coffin, who hadn't made a sound even as the ghost mistress's claws had stabbed through him…

The Chu Wanning who, hiding under the bridge, had secretly erected a barrier to shield everyone from the rain and the wind, but who had not dared to show his face.

The Chu Wanning who, after Shi Mei's death in their previous lifetime, had gone to the kitchen and clumsily made wontons so that Mo Ran might eat something.

The Chu Wanning who had such a bad temper and no way with words, who was afraid of bitter medicine, and who would cough when he tried to eat spicy food—the person with whom Mo Ran was most familiar.

The Chu Wanning whom Mo Ran had never remembered to look after, whom he had hated with gritted teeth, yet whom he had also found quite

pitiful…

Chu Wanning.

Wanning…

"Shizun!" Mo Ran screamed as he scrambled toward Chu Wanning. *"Shizun!"*

"Your token…" Chu Wanning's hand shook as he lifted it. His face was pale, but his mien was as steady as ever. "Trade with me…"

The hand he extended toward Mo Ran held his own blank token. He raised it slowly, with difficulty, his entire arm shivering minutely with pain. Beneath a sheen of tears, his eyes were bright and resolute.

"Hurry. Give it to me!"

Mo Ran hadn't even gotten to his feet. He half crawled, half dragged himself to Chu Wanning and stared helplessly at those horrifying wounds.

"No… Shizun…"

"Shizun!"

Xue Meng and Shi Mei moved to come over as well, but Chu Wanning, exasperated, erected a barrier with a whirl of his hand to keep them back before calling out harshly, "Tianwen!"

Tianwen appeared as called, slicing clean through the dozens of vines piercing Chu Wanning.

But these vines were no ordinary sort. Chu Wanning could clearly feel them devouring his spiritual energy from where they were buried in his flesh. Having no other choice, he could only grit his teeth, grip the broken ends of those vines, and, steeling himself, rip them out.

A rush of blood instantly spilled from his flesh.

Chu Wanning tossed the vines aside and let out a breath, then quickly tapped his meridians, temporarily stopping the blood loss. He leveled a glare at Mo Ran, and his voice was rough as he said, "Give it to me."

"Shizun…"

"Trade tokens with me!" Chu Wanning demanded.

By now, Mo Ran had also figured out what "blood hourglass" meant.

This curse, left by Gouchen millions of years ago, was similar to the one with which Mo Ran had tormented Chu Wanning in their previous life.

Indeed, god or demon, human or ghost, whenever any being reached into the depths of their cruelty, they all came up with more or less the same thing.

Blood hourglass: to pour the blood of a person into an hourglass, in place of sand or water, to keep time. And when the person was bled dry, time was up.

In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, at his coronation ceremony as Taxian-jun, hadn't he used Chu Wanning as a blood hourglass as well? Hadn't he made Chu Wanning watch as he trod over the remaining sects while he ascended to his throne? Hadn't he bled Chu Wanning out, drop by drop, as he watched on?

But in this life, in front of Gouchen's blood hourglass, Chu Wanning was willing to give his own safe token to Mo Ran—was willing to go on the cross in his place. He…

Mo Ran's heart beat out of rhythm in his chest. He couldn't even think.

How could this be? How could this be?!

Having failed to grab a person with its first strike, the copper hourglass brandished its thorny vines, ramping up for a second attack.

Chu Wanning stared at Mo Ran, his eyes flickering with a light that trembled faintly. His face was pale from the pain as he panted softly. "Mo Ran, I—listen to me. Hurry and trade with me."

Mo Ran couldn't speak.

"Hurry…" Chu Wanning's face was as pale as moonlit fresh snow. "Are you trying to make me block a second attack for you?!"

"Shizun…"

The vines shot out again.

In that moment, Mo Ran finally raised his token, and Chu Wanning reached for it without thinking.

But unexpectedly, right as their hands were about to touch, Mo Ran's eyes flashed. He pulled his hand back and instead switched positions to shield

the unguarded Chu Wanning behind his own body. Right at that moment, the second wave of vines reached them, and Mo Ran met them head-on. In an instant, his whole body was bound and swallowed by the vines, and they dragged him to the copper hourglass.

"Mo Ran!"

Dozens of vines coiled around and pinned him tightly to the cross. Mo Ran turned to look toward Chu Wanning. His lips moved.

Chu Wanning's eyes widened abruptly. Mo Ran's voice was quiet, but Chu Wanning could hear it clearly. There was no mistaking it.

He said, "Shizun, I'm really not…beyond remedy…"

So, please, don't give up on me.

But he couldn't finish the rest of the sentence. In his last life, he'd wanted to say it, but he never had. Now, in this lifetime, it was too late.

Whether Chu Wanning gave up on him or not wasn't really important anymore. He just didn't want to owe this person. That was all.

He really was beyond dumb. He already couldn't figure out what it was he felt toward Chu Wanning. He didn't want things to get even more muddled.

Mo Ran thought to himself that in this life, the one he cared about, the one he liked, was Shi Mei and no other. The only reason he didn't want to exchange tokens with Chu Wanning was because he didn't want to owe him a favor. It was only because he didn't want…

He didn't want to see Chu Wanning bleed out again.

Mo Weiyu's heart wasn't made of stone. Nothing made him happier than when someone was nice to him. A little bit of kindness, and his smile would be brilliant as spring. A great, great deal of kindness, and he would willingly die without complaint.

A glittering sword burst out of the dense vines. It was undoubtedly a holy weapon, an ancient thing that emanated an overwhelming aura of valor. A pair of rings flanked its hilt, and its pommel was etched with patterns of thorns. The blade was slender, inlaid with an intricate effigy of a bull-headed dragon, and it coursed with an azure radiance so sharp that it looked like it could slice clean through anything, from the softest hair to the toughest

metal.

Mo Ran only had enough time to read the word “Gouchen” written on the blade; before he got to “the Exalted,” the sword of the God of Weaponry had stabbed directly into his chest.

Blood gushed out of him and flowed directly into the hourglass.

At the same time, a curtain of water descended into the arsenal, separating Mo Ran from the others. The abrupt torrential deluge trapped everyone else on their side.

“A-Ran!” Shi Mei yelled. “A-Ran!”

The rapid downpour blocked their line of sight, rendering it difficult for them to see how Mo Ran was holding up. Chu Wanning tried over and over to break through the water. He was pushed out again and again, until he was drenched all the way through, his eyes dark on his anxious face and his lips wholly without color.

Chu Wanning’s voice was hoarse as he called out, “Mo Ran!”

His voice wasn’t very loud, but it shook terribly. He himself didn’t notice, but Shi Mei startled and turned to look at him. What he saw was his usually calm and composed shizun soaked and disheveled, his long, feathery eyelashes fluttering as he failed to suppress his emotions and worry clouded his features.

Chu Wanning summoned Tianwen, savagery written on his brow, tense as a bowstring stretched taut.

Uneasy, Shi Mei grabbed him. “Shizun, stop it! There’s no way to get through!”

Chu Wanning shook him off, his eyes sharp as blades, and silently raised a barrier to try again. However, the waterfall was infused with the ample spiritual energy of Jincheng Lake. Not only was he unable to break through, the water beat down on him like a thousand cutting, piercing arrows.

Weakened as he was from his grave injuries, the intensity of this impact made it hard to remain standing. Chu Wanning clutched his chest and tried to bear it, but he was forced down to one knee. His face paled as the wounds on his back tore open and started seeping blood.

There was no way to tell if the wetness on Shi Mei’s face was water or

tears. “Shizun!” he cried in distress. “All this—why are you…”

“What do you mean, *why*?” Chu Wanning spat. “If that was you or Xue Meng, I would still…”

The pain was too much; brow knit, he fell silent.

Unexpectedly, a sword flashed from behind the waterfall, effortlessly halving the torrential downpour as easily as if it were slicing tofu.

The energy of that sword was extraordinarily immense. It slashed right toward Shi Mei, exactly where he stood. It was just about to hit him when Chu Wanning flung up his arm and used the last of his spiritual energy to erect a protective barrier around Shi Mei, only to cough up a mouthful of blood from the overexertion.

A deep, clear male voice rang out, measured and reverberating within the vault. “I am the God of Weaponry, Gouchen the Exalted. Thou art bold scoundrels indeed, to trespass into my arsenal of holy weapons!”

Chapter 45:
This Venerable One Knew You Would Come

"WHAT KIND of shitty god are you?!" Xue Meng raged at the empty air. "Are you fucking blind? How the hell are we trespassing?! We're the ones who got snatched. Get your damn facts straight!"

"It's no use," Shi Mei said. "He isn't actually here; that's just a voice he left behind. The fake Gouchen must have meddled with the Heart-Pluck Willow's judgment to make him see us as unscrupulous trespassers."

The voice continued: "Those befitting a holy weapon ought understand virtue and resolve as a matter of course; they ought be unsusceptible to the allure of fantastical illusions and capable of remaining true to their hearts. Since thou hast come, thou must undertake my trial. If thou dost pass, I shall offer thee safe passage and a holy weapon. But if thou art selfish and falter, then thou art unfit to be such a master!"

"Virtue…" Chu Wanning said darkly between bloodstained lips. "Is this your so-called virtue, using someone as a blood hourglass?"

Obviously, he knew that Gouchen the Exalted couldn't actually hear him, but anger drove him to spit out the words, even if every utterance made him breathe harshly and pulled on his wounds. He just couldn't control that unrelenting mouth of his.

The voice heedlessly continued to reverberate through the arsenal.

"As a test of thy temperament, thou shalt imminently be submerged in the Heart-Pluck Willow's dream illusion. If thou shouldst fail to wake from the illusion in time, thy companion shall bleed out and perish."

At these words, the color drained from all three faces.

"What?" Shi Mei murmured.

So, in other words, the three of them were about to be plunged into a dream. And if they didn't manage to wake in time, they would become eternally entranced within that wondrous illusion while in reality, Mo Ran bled out his last.

Xue Meng was dumbstruck for a moment before he snarled, furious, “What kind of god even are you?! If cultivating into an immortal means ending up like you, I won’t deign to so much as touch another sword for the rest of my life!”

Chu Wanning also snapped. “What absurdity!”

“Shizun!” Shi Mei hurriedly tried to calm him. “Don’t get angry. Please be mindful of your injury.”

But Gouchen the Exalted, that bastard, chose this moment to start leisurely reciting poetry. “If one pours water onto level ground / It itself will run north, south, east or west. / Man’s life is also bound to fate, / And we should not lament at work and brood at rest. / So I pour out some wine to soothe my anxiety, / And raise my goblet to stop singing ‘The Road of Adversity.’ / How can my heart made of no stone or wood be indifferent? / But silently I wander around and dare not speak out.”[26]

Xue Meng was seriously about to pass out from anger. “What the hell are you mumbling about?!”

“It’s from ‘The Road to Adversity’ by Bao Zhao,” Shi Mei explained. “The general meaning is that each person has their own fate, so why wallow in remorse? Better to make a toast and soothe yourself with a drink. Since people’s hearts aren’t made of stone, it’s impossible to live without feeling, and many things end up going unsaid.”

Gouchen the Exalted let out a long sigh. “How many people in this vast world would willingly abandon a perfect dream only to save another? The world is filled with incessant war and slaughter. If a holy weapon were to fall into unscrupulous hands, the fault would be mine own. How could I, the very creator of weapons, forgive myself for such sins?”

Suddenly, the holy weapon arsenal grew dim, and the tinkling decorations flying through the air ceased all movement. A faint light came from above, as if the stars of a resplendent sky were slowly descending one by one, their light illuminating the ground.

An intangible voice in the air whispered, “Sleep…”

The soft, translucent light seemed to have a hypnotic effect. Shi Mei and Xue Meng’s cultivation levels were comparatively low, and they quickly sank into slumber.

"Sleep…"

Chu Wanning clenched his teeth and stubbornly forced himself to resist. But the power of a founding god was insurmountable, and in the end, he too was unable to hold out against the lull and fell into a dream as well.

Inside the holy weapon arsenal, as the blood hourglass, Mo Ran was the only one still awake. Blood bubbled up his throat as he coughed, and across the diminished waterfall, he could vaguely make out the other three where they were trapped in dreams.

Chu Wanning, Shi Mei, and Xue Meng, all asleep.

Mo Ran had heard Gouchen's words and knew that the only way to break the spell, and the only way for him to be saved, was for one of them to wake in time to do so.

As time passed, moment after moment, his head grew fuzzier and fuzzier, and his body began to feel colder and colder. But no one woke.

Maybe what goes around comes around, he thought. This was how he had treated Chu Wanning in his previous life, and now it was his turn to feel his blood draining away, drop by drop. How very laughable.

Who among them could possibly abandon the best dream of his life, a dream about the thing they most wanted, just to come save him?

Xue Meng definitely won't. Chu Wanning…never mind, don't even think about him. If anyone, it will probably be Shi Mei.

Mo Ran mused over this woozily, but he had lost too much blood, and his hold on consciousness was beginning to slip. He lowered his head and looked down below his feet. The blood that had drained into the bottom of the copper hourglass mixed with the water inside, dyeing the gleaming liquid a faint red.

Suddenly, he wondered: If he also fell into Gouchen's illusion, what would he see?

Would he dream of delicate, translucent wontons, Shi Mei's gentle smile, Chu Wanning's praise and approval, and the sight when he had first arrived at Sisheng Peak—of haitang flowers drifting across the sky, carried by the breeze?

"Mo Ran…"

He heard someone calling him.

Mo Ran's head remained drooping. He felt like he was about to pass out. Maybe he was already hallucinating. Hearing things.

"Mo Ran. Mo Ran!"

It wasn't a hallucination!

Mo Ran abruptly lifted his head. His pupils contracted at the sight that greeted him. He almost rasped as he cried out, "Shi Mei!"

It was Shi Mei! The one who had woken from the dream, who had abandoned perfection and given up happiness, who, even when everything was exactly as wished, still remembered Mo Ran…was Shi Mei…

Watching that fragile person cross the waterfall and walk toward him, Mo Ran felt himself choking up.

"Shi Mei…you…" He wasn't sure what to say. Mo Ran closed his eyes, his voice hoarse. "Thank you… Even in a blissful dream, you still…still remembered me…"

Shi Mei waded through the water, his irises and eyebrows even more strikingly black against his soaked clothes. His looks were gentle—gentle like the first time Mo Ran had laid eyes on him, gentle like the countless times he'd appeared in Mo Ran's dreams in their previous lifetime, gentle like the way he had remembered Shi Mei when his body grew cold and he had naught else to reach for.

"Don't be foolish," said Shi Mei. "What are you thanking me for?"

Only when he got close did Mo Ran notice that his feet were bleeding.

He didn't know when the ground had become scalding hot. Gouchen the Exalted seemed intent on testing just how far a person was willing to go for their companion, and so the allure of the dream was followed by ruthless torment.

Shi Mei's boots had burnt through. If he didn't step forward, the ground would stay as it was, but if he insisted on doing so, then every step would be accompanied by a surge of flames underfoot—not so hot as to directly render him unable to move, but enough to cause searing agony.

But that gentle person, even while clearly in pain, only glanced down once before his gaze grew even more unwavering and he stepped toward Mo Ran, one foot in front of the other.

"Mo Ran, hold on just a little longer," Shi Mei said. "I'll get you down from there."

Their eyes met, and Mo Ran knew there was no point in saying, "Don't come any closer." Shi Mei's gaze was far too determined, far too resolute. He had never seen this look on Shi Mei's face before. If Mo Ran were in a calmer state of mind, he surely would have found it strange.

Furthermore, Shi Mei had always called him "A-Ran." When had he ever called him "Mo Ran"?

But he was so fixated on Shi Mei's kindness that he altogether failed to realize that the person in front of him right now wasn't Shi Mei at all, but…

Chu Wanning.

The ancient willow's last technique was called Heart Pluck. This so-called Heart Pluck switched the heart and spirit of two people.

When Chu Wanning had broken free of the dream and awoken, he'd found he had switched places with Shi Mei. The Heart-Pluck Willow's magic had transferred his consciousness into Shi Mei's body, and likely vice versa. But Shi Mei remained asleep, and so had no idea that this had occurred.

Chu Wanning had no time to explain, and Mo Ran, completely unaware of the truth, thought that the person before him was in fact Shi Mei. He firmly believed that Shi Mei would absolutely endure the pain to make it to him, just like how he had been absolutely unable to forget Shi Mei's kindness even after his death. People were stubborn creatures.

But it really was too cruel.

When Chu Wanning finally arrived at the copper hourglass and started climbing up the towering vine toward Mo Ran, countless tiny, burning thorns sprouted from that vine.

Chu Wanning was caught off guard, and his hands were burned and pierced all at once. He tried to grab on and keep climbing, but Shi Mei's body and cultivation were both weak. The thorns sliced through the skin and flesh of his hands as he plummeted down the vine.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath, brow furrowed in pain. This useless body of Shi Mingjing's!

"Shi Mei!" Mo Ran shouted.

Chu Wanning tumbled to land on his knees, his skin instantly searing where it made contact with the ground. Brow drawn tight, he bit down on his lip out of habit and refused to cry out.

This expression would have looked stubborn and fierce on his own face, but on Shi Mei's gentle, lovely features, it was somehow only heartrending. He really couldn't compare after all.

"Shi Mei…" Mo Ran opened his mouth to speak, but tears rolled down his cheeks instead. His heart felt like it was being slashed with knives. Through his blurry vision, he watched that thin and fragile body, that frail person, slowly, bit by bit, climbing up the vine.

Thorns pierced those hands, and flames burnt that flesh. Everything was dyed scarlet, a trail of smeared bloodstains in his wake.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, blood clogging his throat. He choked, and his every word trembled. "Shi…Mei…"

That person was close now. Mo Ran saw a brief flash of pain in those eyes; he truly looked to be in a great deal of pain. Even Mo Ran's voice seemed to be a kind of torment to him. His bearing didn't waver, but those eyes could almost have been described as pleading.

"Stop calling my name."

Mo Ran held his tongue.

"Mo Ran, hold on just a bit longer. I'll get you…down…from…there…"

As that person spoke, his eyes glinted with determination like an unsheathed blade, beautiful beyond words on that usually gentle face.

Chu Wanning's robes billowed as he leapt onto the copper hourglass. His face was paper pale, and he stood unsteadily, almost on the verge of collapse. Other than the rise and fall of his chest, he seemed little different from a corpse.

In that moment, Mo Ran felt like it would have been better for him to

just bleed out and die than for Shi Mei to have to suffer like this. Even his voice came out shattered. “I’m sorry.”

Chu Wanning knew that this sorry wasn’t for him. He wanted to explain, but as he glanced at the Exalted Gouchen’s silvery-blue sword protruding from Mo Ran’s chest—the sword being the likely source of spiritual energy for the vines—he worried that if he were to explain, Mo Ran might injure himself further from shock. So, he continued pretending to be Mo Ran’s “Shi Mei” and asked, “Mo Ran, do you trust me?”

“I trust you.” Without hesitation.

Chu Wanning shot him a glance from beneath his lashes and gripped the hilt. The sword was close to Mo Ran’s main artery; the slightest slip could cost him his life.

Chu Wanning’s hand shivered a little where it wrapped around the sword and didn’t move.

The rims of Mo Ran’s eyes were red, but he smiled. “Shi Mei.”

“Mn.”

“Am I about to die?” Mo Ran asked.

“You won’t.”

“If I’m about to die, then…can I… Can I hold you?”

He said it so cautiously, his eyes glistening with wetness, that Chu Wanning’s heart softened despite himself.

However, when he remembered that the person in Mo Ran’s eyes was actually somebody else, that softness instantly froze over.

Chu Wanning suddenly felt like insignificant comic relief on the stage of a play, obscured behind the fetching, flowing sleeves of the female lead and going totally unnoticed. In this touching and heartwarming narrative, he was unneeded and unwanted.

Or maybe his only use was to wear the ugly face of the clown and, with an exaggerated, painted-on smile, to act as a foil to the joys and sorrows, the love and hate of other people. How very laughable.

But Mo Ran knew nothing of his thoughts. He saw the flicker in Chu Wanning’s eyes and, thinking it unwillingness on Shi Mei’s part, quickly

added, “Just for a little while. A little while would be enough.”

A soft sigh, barely audible. “Actually, I…”

“What is it?” asked Mo Ran.

“Never mind,” said Chu Wanning. “It’s nothing.”

With that, he leaned closer—but not too close, for fear of accidentally bumping that sword. Then he reached out and gingerly wrapped his arms around Mo Ran’s shoulders.

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“Shi Mei,” Mo Ran whispered by his ear, “thank you for waking up. Thank you for remembering me, even in that dream.”

Chu Wanning looked down, eyelashes trembling like the fluttering of a butterfly’s wings. Then he smiled faintly. “Don’t mention it.” A pause, then he said, “Mo Ran.”

“Hm?”

Chu Wanning held him, caressing his hair as if still in a dream, and sighed softly once more. “Did you know the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever true?”

Then he pulled away, the hug swiftly finished, like the light touch of a dragonfly on water.

Mo Ran looked up. He didn’t really understand what Shi Mei meant. All he knew was that the brief hug had been Shi Mei’s kindness to him—a piece of candy given out of pity. Sweet and sour, a hint of tartness against his tongue.

The instant that sword was pulled out, blood blossomed in the air like so many haitang flowers, blown from their branches by a fierce gale.

A sharp agony ripped through Mo Ran’s chest. He thought he was about to die, and everything he couldn’t let go of flooded through his thoughts all at once. He blurted out, “Shi Mei, actually, I’ve always liked you. Do you…?”

With the sound of the sword falling to the ground, the vines instantly dissipated, the tumultuous downpour of water abruptly ceased, and the holy weapon arsenal returned to its former tranquility.

I’ve always liked you. Do you…?

Mo Ran’s body had reached its limits, and darkness swept across his vision.

A pair of bloodstained hands caught him as he fell into Shi Mei’s arms. He didn’t know if he was seeing things, but Shi Mei’s thin eyebrows were drawn together as he slowly closed his eyes, and a glistening wetness seemed to slide slowly down that face. He seemed to hear Shi Mei softly whisper, “Me too.”

Mo Ran's breath caught. He had to be seeing things. Why else would Shi Mei look so miserable as he answered?

"I also…like you."

Finally unable to hold out any longer, Mo Ran sank into unconsciousness.

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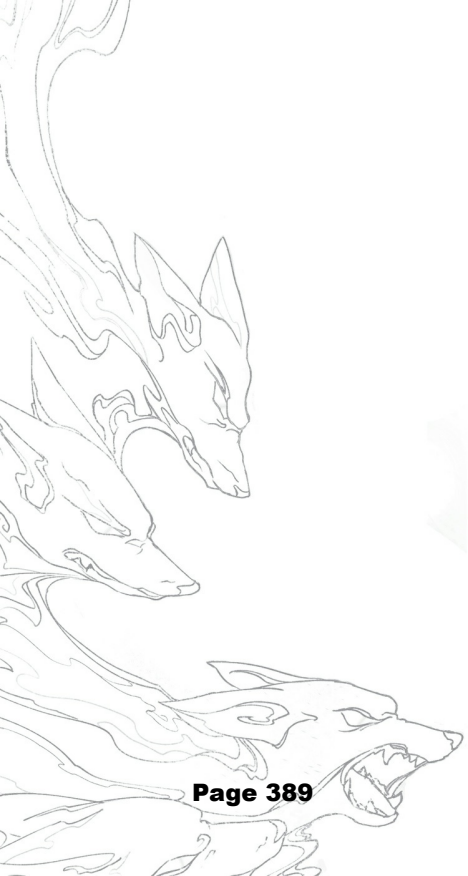

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THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
VOLUME 2

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

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Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

Courtesy name: Weiyu (微雨 / “gentle rain”)

Title(s):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / “treading on immortals”)

Weapon(s):

Bugui (不归 / “no return”)

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

Spiritual element: Wood

Orphaned at a young age, Mo Ran was found at fourteen by his uncle, Xue Zhengyong, and brought back to Sisheng Peak. Despite his late start, he has a natural talent for cultivation. In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. Reinventing himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, he committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. To Mo Ran’s surprise, he woke to find himself back in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all new choices, which is where the story begins.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning “evening peace”

Title(s):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, “late night”; Yuheng, “Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major”)

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 Beidou “the Big Dipper,” title *xianzun*, “immortal”)

Weapon(s):

Tianwen / 天问 “Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life’s enigmatic questions.” The name reflects Tianwen’s interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 “Nine Songs.” Chu Wanning describes it as having a “chilling temperament.”

Spiritual element: Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering, as well as an elder of Sisheng Peak. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has only three disciples to his name: Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran. In Mo Ran’s previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive and eventually died as a prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran’s shizun, as well as the target of Mo Ran’s mixed feelings of fear, loathing, and lust.

Chu Wanning’s titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning’s weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons’ primary attacks, such as “Wind,” take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风, *feng*, “wind”), courtly songs (雅, *ya*, “elegant”), or eulogies (颂, *song*, “ode”).

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng “blind/ignorant”

Courtesy name: Ziming (子明 / “bright/clever son”)

The “darling of the heavens,” Chu Wanning’s first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang’s son, and Mo Ran’s cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires.

Shi Mei

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, “to conceal”

Courtesy name: Mingjing (明净 / “bright and clean”)

Early name(s): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, “little girl”)

Xue Meng’s close friend, Chu Wanning’s second disciple, and Mo Ran’s boyhood crush. Gentle, kind, and patient, with beautiful looks to match, Shi Mei often plays peacemaker when his fellow disciples argue, which is often. Where Mo Ran and Xue Meng are more adept in combat, he specializes in the healing arts.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

Weapon: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang

王夫人

Xue Meng's mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran's aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect and specializes in the healing arts.

A-Li

阿狸

Madam Wang's cat. Not pregnant, just fat.

SISHENG PEAK ELDERS

The names of Sisheng Peak's elders vary in origin. Most of their names come from the constellation Ursa Major, such as Chu Wanning's "Yuheng." Three elders take their names from the Sha Po Lang star triad used in a form of fortune-telling based on Chinese astrology.

Jielü Elder

戒律长老 Jielü, "discipline"

In charge of meting out discipline.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, "Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star"

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Lucun Elder

禄存长老 Lucun, "Phecda, the gamma Ursae Majoris star"

Beautiful and foppish. Has a habit of phrasing things in a questionable manner.

Qisha Elder

七杀长老 Qisha, “Polis, the Power Star in Sha Po Lang”

Very done with Lucun Elder.

Pojun Elder

破军长老 Pojun, “Alkaid, the Ruinous Star in Sha Po Lang”

Forthright and spirited.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, “Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang”

Sardonic and ungentle with his words.

WIDER SISHENG AREA

Rong Jiu

容九 Surname Rong; given name Jiu, “nine”

A prostitute in a brothel of the pleasure district near Sisheng Peak. In his previous lifetime, he was greatly favored by Mo Ran only to repay him by stealing Mo Ran’s cultivation for Chang Da. Eventually died of an STD. In the current timeline, his plot was foiled by the newly reborn Mo Ran.

Chang Da

常大 Surname Chang; family status, “eldest”

The eldest son of a wealthy salt merchant family in Yizhou whom Mo Ran nicknames Da Chang, “Big Intestine.” In their previous lifetime, Chang Da bought Rong Jiu’s freedom and took Rong Jiu into his household in

exchange for helping him steal Mo Ran's cultivation.

BUTTERFLY TOWN

Chen family

A wealthy family in Butterfly Town whose wealth comes from the perfumery business, specifically the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance.

Landlord Chen 陈员**外**—Patriarch of the Chen family.

Madam Chen 陈**夫人**—Matriarch of the Chen family. Maiden name Sun, married name Chen.

Chen Bohuan 陈**伯寰**—Eldest son of the Chen family. Childhood sweetheart of Luo Xianxian.

Madam Chen-Yao 陈**姚氏**—Chen Bohuan's wife. The governor's daughter.

Second Chen Son

Third Chen Son

Chen Yanji 陈**言吉**—Fourth son of the Chen family.

Youngest Chen Daughter

Luo Xianxian

罗纤纤 Surname Luo; given name Xianxian, "delicate, slender")

A young girl of Butterfly Town. She and her father were neighbors of the Chen family, and she and Chen Bohuan became childhood sweethearts. Kind, honest, and hardworking, a gentleman to the core.

Scholar Luo 罗书**生**

Luo Xianxian's father. A failed scholar who nonetheless retained scholarly attitudes toward principles and morals. He also dabbled in

perfumery and eventually created the “Hundred Butterfly Fragrance.”

Unnamed young man

A mysterious, blood-covered young man whom Luo Xianxian encountered in her childhood.

Ghost Mistress of Ceremonies 鬼司仪

A local deity of Butterfly Town who presides over the ghost marriages conducted there.

JINCHENG LAKE

Gouchen the Exalted

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, “Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation”; shanggong, “exalted”)

The God of Weaponry, who oversees the northern- and southernmost ends of the heavens, and whose domain includes all the weapons of the world. He forged the first true “sword” into existence at Dawning Peak for the Heavenly Emperor Fuxi during the emperor’s war with the demons. Named after one of the Four Heavenly Ministers in Chinese mythology, who oversees matters in the human world.

Wangyue

望月 Wangyue, “full moon”; alternatively, “gazing at the moon”

A huge, turquoise-black dragon who lives in Jincheng Lake. In their previous lifetime, he gave Mo Ran his sword, Bugui, in exchange for a plum blossom from the foot of the mountain.

Ji Baihua

姬白华 Surname Ji; given name Baihua, “white, magnificent”

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A fox spirit who designed the magical artifact Ever-Yearning. A romantic at heart.

Heart-Pluck Willow

摘心柳 Zhaixin Liu, “Heart-Pluck Willow”

The spirit of the willow tree in Jincheng Lake, which shelters Gouchen the Exalted’s arsenal of holy weapons.

Song Qiutong

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, “autumn, tung tree”

Taxian-jun’s wife and empress in his previous lifetime. Bears a resemblance to Shi Mei. She hailed from Rufeng Sect before Taxian-jun burned it down, and her tombstone was engraved with the words “Grave of the Deep-Fried Empress Song.” She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Mei Hanxue

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, “to hold, snow”

A cultivator of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He has trained in seclusion for more than ten years, emerging into the world only recently. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments. According to Xue Zhengyong, he sends flower petals flying everywhere when he uses qinggong.

Liu-gong 刘公

An elderly servant of Taxian-jun in his previous lifetime.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, “honoring Confucian ideals”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern day Shandong Province. Has seventy-two cities and is known for being affluent and well-respected. In Taxian-jun’s lifetime, he burned them all to the ground.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, “stepping softly across snow”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, “a lonely moon in the night sky”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭**)**

Chu Wanning’s residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it “Red Lotus Hell” or the “Pavilion of Broken Legs.”

Yanluo Hall (阎罗殿**)**

The self-reflection hall. Named after Lord Yanluo. (*See Terminology for more information*.)

Platform of Sin and Virtue (善恶台)

A platform where public punishments are carried out.

Naihe Bridge (奈何桥)

The Sisheng Peak bridge that connects to the disciples' quarters. Named after the mythological bridge that souls must cross to be reborn.

Mengpo Hall (孟婆堂)

The dining hall at Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological old woman who distributes memory-erasing soup to souls before they are reborn.

Discipline Court (戒律庭)

The hall where discipline is enforced.

Clear Sky Hall (青天殿)

A hall where physical punishment is meted out.

This is a Mountain (这是山)

A mountain.

This is Water (这是水)

A lake.

This is a Pothole (这是坑)

A hole. (?)

Aaaaah (啊啊啊) and Waaaah Cliffs (哇哇哇)

Yes.

Wuchang Town

无常镇 Wuchang, “the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence”

A town not far from Sisheng Peak.

Caidie Town, a.k.a. Butterfly Town 彩蝶镇

A town noted for its relative prosperity compared to its neighbors. Its specialty exports are flowers, fragrance, and perfume powder. It also cleaves to the tradition of ghost marriages.

House of Drunken Jade 醉玉楼

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events of the current timeline.

Dawning Peak 旭映峰

A sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, within the territory of Linyi Rufeng Sect. Known as the place where Gouchen the Exalted forged the Heavenly Emperor’s sword, it is now a pilgrimage site for cultivators seeking holy weapons.

Dai City 岱城

A mildly prosperous city by the foot of Dawning Peak. Caters to traveling cultivators on their way to Jincheng Lake.

Jincheng Lake 金成池

A lake at the summit of Dawning Peak that remains frozen over year-round. According to legend, it was formed by a drop of Gouchen the Exalted’s blood, shed as he forged the Heavenly Emperor’s holy sword.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie: Older sister or an older female friend.

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household.

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Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Husky.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hurt**

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ Wǎnníng

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel

pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

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Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts —both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving

immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

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TERMINOLOGY

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility.

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and martial artists. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases") in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators' spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning's elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Ghost marriage: Also known as a yin marriage, ghost marriages (冥

婚) are a funerary tradition wherein young men and women who died before marriage are joined in posthumous matrimony.

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crabapple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖, "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, and artisans and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on

redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Mythical Creatures: Chinese mythology boasts numerous mythological creatures, several of which make appearances in *Husky*, including:

Fuban: A type of bug. Greedy by nature, it gathers and hoards rocks until it is crushed to death under the literal weight of its own greed. In *Husky*, it has the nickname "Foolish Old Man," after the titular character in the Chinese folktale "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains."

Kunpeng: An entity that transforms from a giant bird into a giant fish.

Qilin: A one-horned chimera said to appear extremely rarely. Commonly associated with the birth or death of a great ruler or sage.

Xishu: A giant rat that appears in folklore.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of

forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

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The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wedding Traditions: Red is the color of prosperity, happiness, and good luck. It remains the standard color for bridal and bridegroom robes as well as wedding decorations.

A bride was veiled when she was sent off by her family in her wedding dress. Veils were generally opaque, so the bride would need to be led around by her handmaidens (or the groom). The veil was only removed by the groom himself. During the ceremony, among a series of other marriage rites, the couple each cut off a lock of their own hair, then intertwined and tied the two locks together to symbolize their commitment.

White Moonlight: A romantic trope referring to a distant romantic paragon who is cherished in memory long after that person is gone. Like the moon in the sky, the memory is always present, perfect and unchanging, but like the pale light by one's bedside, it is an incorporeal shine that can only be admired, not touched. The object of admiration is out of reach, and the admiration is functionally one-way.

Willow Tree: Willow trees in Chinese culture have a plethora of meanings, including friendship, longing, femininity, and more. The Chinese word for willow (柳) is a homonym for the word "stay," which has led to it being featured in many poems and stories as a symbol of farewell and a reluctance to part.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal [redacted] after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"
Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

[redacted]
No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]
2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi Roasting Writing Contest

[redacted] Xi"
[redacted]

[redacted]"
Orig[redacted]

Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"
Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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Footnotes

1. 王八, wang ba, “tortoise,” is also slang for “cuckold” and “bastard.” Tortoises also represent long life. The implication is that Mo Ran chose this name because 1) he felt like it 2) he wanted to show that he was above rules and etiquette 3) he hoped that his rule would be a long and lasting one.

2. 戢罢, ji ba, meaning “cease battle,” shares a pronunciation with the vulgar slang for dick (鸡巴).

3. 元, yuan, meaning “the first of,” shares a pronunciation with 圆, yuan, for “ball.”

4. 师妹, shimei, a younger martial sister.

5. 蒙昧, meng mei, meaning “ignorant/oblivious” or “concealed.”

6. Da chang is a homonym for “big intestine.”

7. The first line of “Plucking the Willow Branch” by Zhang Jiuling, a Tang dynasty poet.

8. Naihe Bridge is the bridge between life and death, which one must cross to be reborn.

9. Mengpo is hell’s soup lady, who feeds a memory-erasing brew to souls before rebirth.

10. The disciple’s name, 要脸, Yao Lian, is a homonym for “saving

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face.”

11. 丹心, danxin, “loyal heart” in this phrase is the same as in Loyalty Hall, while 死生, shisheng, “life or death” is the same as the name of Sisheng Peak.

12. 囍, xi, is a ligature composed of two characters for “joy.” It is associated with marriage and symbolizes joy and happiness for newlyweds.

13. Guides in the underworld with childlike appearances.

14. A concept related to karma, which one may gain or lose depending on one’s behavior, meritori-ous or otherwise.

15. 白无常, “White Impermanence” is one of a pair of entities, the other being 黑无常, “Black Impermanence”; the two are dressed in white and black respectively and are subordinates of Lord Yanluo, the Supreme Judge of the Underworld. They work together to collect deceased souls for judgment.

16. A poem by Song dynasty poet Lu You, who was forced by his mother to leave his wife.

17. 师美人, shi meiren, “beauty,” a play on Shi Mei’s name.

18. Chu Wanning’s guesses are all food-related puns based on Mo Ran’s given and courtesy names.

19. To eat someone’s tofu is to take advantage of them; commonly used to describe sexual harass-ment. Chu Wanning here uses the surface-

level meaning of the words, not realizing the innuendo.

20. Gay; originates from a folktale about an emperor who cut his sleeve off because he didn't want to wake his male lover, who was sleeping upon it.

21. In modern times, purple has been associated with homosexuality. This is a bit of a joke on the author's part.

22. A willow branch symbolizes the ache of parting and is given as a parting gift; from Li Bai's
宣城送刘副使入秦

23. Chinese chess, more commonly known as weiqi.

24. Cang Jie is a figure in Chinese mythology, supposedly the inventor of Chinese characters.

25. A reference to the Chinese parable of Chunyu Fen and his dreams of power, which speaks to the impermanence and illusory nature of wealth and grandeur.

26. Translation by Robert Shanmu Chen.

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